CBW

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For PCV Professionals

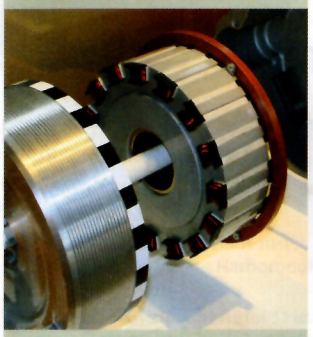
COACH AND BUS WEEK Wednesday July 19, 2006 **Issue 739** £2.50

1st with the news every Wednesday

THIS WEEK

Leaving soon
Kent operator Warrens sells up after 87 years in the industry
page 8

Under fire
Big bus companies face the Select Committee
page 20



ZF moves on
Latest 'boxes shown off in show preview
page 26

Stay onside
Keep legal on football runs
page 30

Decker design revealed

East Lancs unveils new model **page 6**

England...

... and what it was like to drive the team in Germany
pages 24-25

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Round we go again

Last week's BBC 'exposé' of the school bus system brought a reaction from our readers, and probably for good reason.

If you missed Real Story's documentary, which picked holes in the school bus almost as efficiently as its passengers, hit some touchy subjects which this magazine and others have raised time and again, over two decades.

Perhaps the gem of the programme was an undercover interview with a Welsh character who had been relieved of his O licence but was still happy to talk to the reporter about hiring his minibus, preferably for cash. I have lost count of the number of times responsible operators have pleaded for vigilance from VOSA to monitor the activities of banned operators.

Nor, we could have told the BBC reporter, is this situation unique; we hear tales of 'phoenix' operations almost every month, some of which concern operators who have gone bust then resurfaced as if their debts don't exist (which, legally, they don't) and others of banned managements who disguise their O licence applications with other names.

To be fair to the traffic commissioners, they do nail some of the worst and they are - as they say - an undermanned department which depends on 'intelligence' from other operators. If it brought to an end further documentaries like Real Story, self-policing wouldn't be a bad idea.

The programme also looked at the CRB check in, I thought, a very balanced way. It argued that CRB checks should extend to every bus and coach driver, as a great many have unsupervised access to children at some point. I echo the thoughts of traffic commissioners, who say the CRB check should be administered as part of the PSV driving licence. We may be short of drivers, but you can never be too short of sex offenders.

But perhaps the most damning comments came from BUSK's Pat Harris, who argued that school contracts should be long enough to allow for investment in quality; and from senior traffic commissioner Philip Brown, who said in essence that local authorities should raise their game. I've heard that before somewhere....

Mark Williams

Mark Williams
Editor

Coach and Bus Week is a supporter of the following organisations:

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Promoting Travel and Tourism by Coach

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Contents

News...
New vehicle registrations; Warrens shut up shop; First into Europe; East Lancs new decker; 14 pages of News
starts page 4

Select few discuss future
How the PLCs handled the Select Committee
pages 20-21

World Cup Wheels
Exclusive interview with England coach driver!
pages 24-25

Future gearing
Sneak preview of ZF's new range of geabox, axle and steering solutions
pages 36-39

Regulars

News	4
Bus News	6
Coach News	8
Tour News	10
Open Platform	22
In Box	23
Legal News	30
Deliveries	32
People	34
Classified	35
Last Stop	42

Dunwoody down on the industry

She says operators and the DfT have to do better

Operators waiting for the findings of the Transport Select Committee's investigation into 'Bus Services across the UK' will be disappointed to hear it is unlikely to contain good news.

In an exclusive interview with *CBW* last week, the Committee chairman Gwyneth Dunwoody made it very clear that she thinks bus companies should be doing more to grow patronage.

"We are moving towards the situation where the bus industry is taking more and more public money and I think the generally held view is they're not delivering the goods. That's a bad combination," she said.

On what the industry could do she says: "I'm not sure there is any lateral thinking, I'm not sure there is any revolutionary thinking. I'm not sure they're responding to the challenges which any business must have."

In contrast she was supportive of local authorities, calling them "very hamstrung" because they do not have the same powers as Transport for London.

But it was not just the bus companies who came in for criticism. On the DfT she says, "We have problems with the department's attitude to buses, I think, rather than other things, because I suspect that it isn't something that they've entirely thought through."

She stands by the first Select Committee investigation into bus services in 2002, and says she does not expect the new one to be fundamentally different: "We expect it to be in effect an update. But we also think that the situation has changed. There really is now a situation where the government is funding this form of transport to a much greater extent than it did, and someone is soon going to have to make some very difficult decisions."

Gwyneth Dunwoody MP

■ Full interview next week.

Oil crisis?

Expert opinion is split on what effect the crisis in the Middle East will have on oil prices.

The AA Motoring Trust is calling on government to freeze fuel duty to prevent the pump price passing £1 per litre, while the UK Petroleum Industry Association says supply is unaffected, and that the price will settle.

According to industry analyst Catalist, diesel prices hit an average of 98.93 pence a litre on Sunday while unleaded petrol hit a record price of 97.02p. The current record price for diesel is 99.19p a litre on May 4.

As *CBW* closed for press the price of Brent crude was poised below $80 a barrel, at $77.99, and predicted to rise.

The AA says the duty rise due in September should be frozen to prevent the price of petrol passing through £1 per litre, and that panic buying could set off another fuel shortage. Chris Hunt, director of the UK Petroleum Industry Association, was quoted by the BBC as saying the high cost of petrol was "short-term and purely speculative".

Oil production levels have not been altered by the conflict, he said, so any resolution of the crisis would dampen prices.

New seatbelt laws confirmed

The DfT has announced that new seatbelt laws for coach and bus passengers will come into effect from Monday September 18, 2006. The legislation will be known as The Motor Vehicle (Wearing of Seatbelts) (Amendment) Regulations 2006.

The new law says that all seated passengers are required to wear a seatbelt if one is available and applys to all buses and coaches having over eight seats. The operator is obliged to ensure the passenger knows the seatbelt should be worn, and must advise by either of two methods: an official safety announcement like on aeroplanes before take-off; or by a prominently displayed sign or pictogram.

If a pictogram is used it must be in the exact form as specified by the DfT. If a sign is used, it must be easily visible, ie attached to the back of the seat in front or on a window adjacent to a seat.

Operators not notifying passengers of the new requirement will have committed an offence, although the DfT has not included a separate offence for drivers.

The requirements do not cover children. The DfT published separate guidance on child seatbelts and says it will be consulting on further regulations requiring children under 14 years to use seatbelts in minibuses, taxis and coaches.

Exemptions to the new rules include where the vehicle is being used to carry standing passengers, or where the vehicle is used on 'restricted roads'.

Green tax for planes approved

The European Parliament has voted in favour of a 'green tax' on flights within the European Union, to cover the environmental impact of the journeys. Aviation is the fastest growing source of greenhouse gases and flights within Europe are set to increase, with numbers expected to triple by 2030. MEPs voted 439 to 74 to accept the proposal. This tax on jet fuel would mean passengers being charged up to £40 extra for a return ticket. The European Parliament also accepted a recommendation for a trading scheme which would involve airlines buying permits to cover their carbon dioxide emissions. The parliament's vote is set to strongly influence legislation.

Coldplay front man Chris Martin says he likes to get to gigs using public transport, although it is not quite the endorsement the bus industry might hope for. Chris, a vegan and environmental campaigner, told the *Daily Mirror* at the weekend: "I try getting to shows at the same time as everyone else. I've been stuck in traffic, I've been on an over-crowded train and I've lined up to buy an overpriced hot-dog. Quite often this will put me in a bad mood. So I know just what it's like for everyone else who is paying. It makes me more determined to get on-stage and really deliver a show that makes it all worthwhile for everyone."

CPT was awarded the Trade Association Forum's Membership Success Award at a 'Winners' dinner last week at the Millennium Hotel, Mayfair, London. The judging panel commended CPT's strategy as "a great exemplar for other associations." The award was presented to the CPT team by Lord Heseltine. On accepting the award, CPT's Director of Membership and Commercial Services, Peter Gomersall, said: "I am delighted to accept the award on behalf of CPT. It reflects the great progress we have made in both our membership recruitment and retention campaigns and commercial service strategies. We hope to build on this success and continue to provide quality services to best suit members' needs."

Welsh transport plans

Increased support for bus travel is a major theme of Connecting Wales, the Welsh Assembly Government's transport strategy consultation document published last week. It comes against a background of rising car use and lower bus patronage than in the rest of the UK.

To right the balance, WAG envisages local road user charging pilots, to discourage single-occupancy car use and encourage alternative modes. At the same time, it wants to see "better co-ordination of transport fleets through pricing and regulation".

WAG is encouraging a 'hub-and-spoke' approach of connecting commercially-operated bus services with subsidised links and community transport, with high-quality interchanges. It promises increased use of modern information technology to promote wider travel choice.

It wants to see more longer-distance bus and coach services to serve the large areas of the country that do not have ready rail access. The Strategy acknowledges the "particular challenge" of providing cost-effective public transport in the remoter, lightly-populated areas, and sees scope for "innovative schemes".

WAG also wants to explore pooling of education and health authority fleets, and holiday-time public use of school buses to provide additional capacity at times of high demand. (Wales has a high proportion of pupils going to school by bus than Great Britain as a whole).

With tourism a key contributor to the Welsh economy, WAG envisages more rail shuttle buses and temporary peak-period park-and-ride sites at major destinations. There should also be greater cooperation between bus and attraction operators on combined fares and entry charges, it says.

VOSA starts restructuring

VOSA has released more details of its upcoming centralisation programme. As reported in *CBW* 737, the processing of operator licence applications will move from Traffic Area offices to a central unit in Leeds later this year. Bus service registration functions will also be centralised, but traffic commissioners will stay in their current locations. It will be possible to hand deliver documents to regional offices, but there will not be manned counters, and cash payments will not be possible. The centralisation should be complete by March 2007.

CBW late? Just click twice to help

CBW wants to know when you get your copy each week so we can improve our postal delivery.

Just two clicks on the *www.cbwnet.co.uk* website will produce the answers we need to trace troublespots. The magazine should be with you on Wednesday, but we are aware that in some areas, readers have been getting *CBW* on Thursday.

Just take a few seconds to click our on-line survey - it's completely anonymous. Just type *www.cbwnet.co.uk* into your internet browser and check the relevant boxes.

Briefly

The Mayor of London has announced stricter emissions targets for taxis. By July 2008 all taxis will have to be Euro 3 compliant for NOx and PM10 particles. Pre-Euro and Euro 1 vehicles will have to have approved emissions equipment fitted before renewing licences. In April 2005 an environmental levy of 20p was added to the fixed minimum fare to pay for the cost of conversion.

The DfT has revealed it will consider removing the maximum charge for MOT tests and let the market decide the correct level. It is currently consulting over an increase in MOT maximum fees. The increases range from £6.45 (to £52.60) for class IV vehicles, to £9.10 (to £74.10) for PCVs with over 16 seats. The highest fee will be £114.45, for class VA vehicles of over 16 seats, including a seatbelt installation test.

The Forum of Private Business (FPB) wants the European Competition Authorities to investigate VisitBritain's online holiday planner Englandnet. The holiday booking system, which was set up by the British Tourist Authority. VisitBritain, aims to be a "one stop virtual high street for English Tourism". The FPB claims the Englandnet system may be in breach of European State Aid rules, and could affect small tourism firms.

Delegates from Derby City Council have been inspecting a driverless Rapid Transit Scheme, and say the technology is a possibility for the city. They saw the vehicles and track demonstrated in Cardiff last week. One councillor said: "I came thinking it would be far too expensive for us to invest in, but if we can persuade people to invest in this it would be very cheap to run." The makers claim the track costs £3-5 million per kilometre to build, but the cars themselves cost only 1p a day to run.

BUSES

Briefly

Martin Griffiths, executive director at Stagecoach Group, has also been appointed as a non-executive director of Robert Walters plc, a recruitment and human resources outsourcing consultancy.

Ken Livingstone has been invited by Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (SPT) to give the keynote address at its summit on public transport difficulties in Glasgow, in the autumn.

Bus Éireann is awaiting the go ahead from the Irish Transport Ministry over its order for an extra 100 Volvo deckers. The company ordered 100 ADL Enviro500s earlier in the year, and has applied to have the order increased by a further 100. A spokesman says they are hopeful of a decision before the government breaks for summer this week.

The bus shelter being sold on EBay by St Edmundsbury Borough Council in Suffolk has been bought, for £1,800. The buyer, and the reason for the purchase, is unknown. The shelter will have to be dismantled and taken away by late August.

TfL is celebrating the 50th anniversary of London Transport's Direct Recruitment Scheme in the Caribbean later this year, and wants to hear from anybody who was involved. TfL wants to publish recollections and photographs on its website, or reproduce them in a publication to mark the anniversary. See *http://www.tfl.gov.uk/tfl/about/generations/terms.asp* for more information.

First PMT has delayed the closure of its Newcastle depot while the depots that will take the work are upgraded, according to local press reports. First PMT commercial director Paul de Santis says there will be no redundancies. The move is now planned for April 2007.

Volvo B9TL chassis is the first option for East Lancashire's new range of double-deckers

Delaine first for Olympus

Bourne-based operator is first customer for new decker

The first Volvo B9TL chassis arrives at East Lancashire coachbuilders in Blackburn this month, and will launch a new range of double deck bodywork to follow the Vyking and Lolyne range of low floor double deck models, over 1,000 of which have been built since 1999.

The Olympus has a family resemblance to the recently-launched Esteem, which will initially be offered on the Volvo B9TL in 10.3m and 10.9m lengths, the Scania N270 in 10.6 and 11.9m lengths, the Dennis Enviro 400 range and the VDL DB 250 at 10.3m, 10.8m and possibly a longer variant now the chassis GVW has been increased to 18t.

The first two production vehicles, destined for Delaine of Bourne and Hams of Flimwell will be launched in late October and exhibited at the Expo Bus & Coach Show in November. One vehicle will be displayed at the show while the other will be on show outside.

The vehicle is constructed using the Alcan (Alusuisse) bolted construction system and using the composite inter-deck which will continue to allow East Lancs to offer some of the lowest overall height vehicles in the current market place, 4.2m (13'9" in old money) and 4.3m (14'1") which meets the London requirements of 1.83m (6'0) upper deck). The vehicles will also feature an uplifted interior, after the positive reaction to the changes on the Esteem.

Currently, orders include three for the long-established East Lancs customer Delaine of Bourne. Hams of Flimwell will take the first fully-compliant seat belt variant, Morton's of Ballyboden and Dualway of Rathcoole in Dublin have also ordered seat belt variants for their private hire fleets. Dualway has also ordered an open top variant for its Dublin Tour, details of which will be announced in the next few weeks.

In addition, two three-axle double deckers have also been ordered.

East Lancs managing director John Horn said that first reactions from the many operators involved in the new designs was that East Lancs was certainly putting the 'wow!' factor back into UK bus design without forgetting the practicalities of the day-to-day operation and maintenance that are faced.

Jarvis branches out

Roger Jarvis, who returned to bus operations in Lancashire with the purchase of Whittaker's Coach Travel in May (*CBW* 17 May), has started the second side to his business – the short-term hire of buses, with the purchase of seven new or nearly new low-floored, DDA-compliant vehicles. The seven comprise three new Optare Solos, three new MCV-bodied Darts and an East Lancs bodied Scania double-decker, which is less than a year old. Four of the buses are on site at the moment, and the remaining three are expected within a week.

Mr Jarvis told *CBW* that as a small operator he knew how difficult it was to deal with a special vehicle when it was off the road.

"If you have a contract that requires a particular vehicle, and it has accident damage, or is waiting for an insurance assessor, you need a similar vehicle for only a matter of weeks," he said.

"I will be concentrating on short-term hire, and if someone rings me up and pays by credit card over the phone, he can have a fully fit bus for service in any part of the country the next morning."

Contact Roger by phone on 01772 740022.

First's Royal approval

Prince Charles awarded First Group the Skills for Life award at the Business in the Community Awards last week, for the development of its country-wide learning centres initiative.

First has 40 learning centres, situated at its operating company depots, with more on the way this year. From a standing start, in four years 60% of First UK Bus staff now have direct access to learning facilities.

Clare Hannah, First UK Bus learning and development manager says: "The scheme continues to be a huge success for First, helping to lower staff turnover, increase ethnic minority recruitment and raise customer satisfaction levels."

■ The shareholder challenge to First Group at its AGM last week, pressing for compliance with employment principles laid down by the UN's International Labour Organisation, was defeated 93% to 7%.

American school bus drivers from the company's First Student subsidiary in the US, staged a protest outside the building in Aberdeen where the meeting was being held last Thursday. The drivers say they face intimidation and dismissal in America for trying to win union rights. The company denies the allegations, saying it has been caught up in a major push to recruit members in the face of declining membership for unions over the past decades.

At the AGM, James Forbes, Martyn Williams, Sidney Barrie and Professor David Begg were all re-elected as directors and the company re-affirmed its plan to increase the annual dividend by 10% until "at least" 2008.

The company had a very positive message for investors. The board says it is confident about its prospects for the year, saying trading in the first three months of the year has started well and is ahead of expectations. It says UK Bus revenue is "strong" and passenger journeys for the UK as a whole have increased.

In America, First says the business has performed well. First Student retained over 95% of existing contracts, and has improved terms to reflect cost increases, along with market growth.

The winners left to right: Julia Cleverdon, BITC chief executive; Johnny McCormack, Northern Ireland representative, UK Youth Parliament; Dave Kaye, deputy MD; Chris McCormick, UK learning centre manager; Chris Jefferies, learning and development manager; Mick Dowds, chair of NLC/NDC; HRH Prince Charles; Richard Lambert, director general, CBI; Lionel Barber, editor, *FT*

Stagecoach in Cumbrian squeeze

Stagecoach is being blamed for holding up the roll-out of a county-wide concessionary fares scheme in Cumbria. Fare increases announced last week will require the local authority to find an extra £25,500 to cover the increased cost of running the scheme.

A change of ruling party at the recent council elections led to the previously delayed scheme being put back on the agenda. Council leaders had budgeted for a 6% price rise, but Stagecoach will increase fares by an average 10% from the end of July.

The company last raised fares, by 6%, last September. The council was meeting to discuss the issue as *CBW* went to press.

The company is blaming "massive" increases in costs over the last year for the price rises. Chris Bowles, managing director of Stagecoach North West, told *CBW* that two price rises in 12 months was unusual for a Stagecoach company: "This is very much a change against type for us, and really taken as a last resort. We appreciate it has put a little bit of pressure on Concessionary Travel budgets."

Briefly

■ **Cleveland police are experimenting with a new scheme to name and shame criminals, by fixing huge posters of them to the sides and backs of buses in the area. Other forces are said to be monitoring the experiment very closely. One commentator says naming is easy, but shaming them when their face is so publicly on display is a different matter.**

■ **Liverpool's £32m South Parkway Interchange opened on Friday. Merseytravel laid on music and entertainment for the first day customers. The eco-friendly building features a rainwater collection system, and is heated by geo-thermal heat pumps that draw energy from deep boreholes.**

■ **Volvo Canadian subsidiary, Nova Bus of Quebec, has won an order worth CAN $300m for 731 buses from ATUQ, a purchasing group consisting of nine of Quebec's transit authorities. The buses are due for delivery between 2008 and 2012. The order is for conventional 40-foot city buses and hybrid vehicles. The new hybrid model that Nova Bus will launch shortly was a key factor in securing the order said a Nova Bus spokesman.**

■ **Figures from Transport for London show that London's roads have become safer for children, with a 62% reduction in the number of child road casualties since the mid/late 1990s. These statistics also show a 45% reduction in the overall number of people killed or seriously injured in the same period.**

■ **Ken Livingstone plans to cut carbon emissions, by amending the Congestion Charging scheme to encourage the use of cars with low levels of carbon dioxide emissions. He has asked Transport for London to produce proposals for changes which will offer discounts for these cars, and higher charges for cars with high levels of carbon dioxide.**

COACHES

Warrens to shut up shop

Kent operator ceases trading after 87 years in business

Warrens Coaches of Kent is to close its gates at the end of the month and cease trading after 87 years in business.

The Ticehurst-based operator whose history spans three generations has sold its contracts and private hire book to nearby Hams Travel of Wadhurst and Benenden, with a number of the staff transferring. But the fleet of ten vehicles is to be sold, and the cuurent MD, Graham Fry, is taking retirement.

Established in 1919 by Phillip 'PG' Warren with two Model T Fords, Warrens Coaches then passed to Mr Fry's father-in-law, Derek Warren. A former World War II POW who'd escaped via Switzerland, Derek took his knowledge of mainland Europe home with him, and launched Warrens into continental touring in the 1950s, when coaches were loaded by crane onto the ferries.

The fleet grew to 17 vehicles latterly, Warrens having acquired a second site at Tenterden. This site was sold last year for redevelopment and the fleet reduced by seven vehicles. Graham Fry joined as general manager in 1969 and became MD in 1989 when Derek died.

Above: End of the line for Warren Coaches. Below: Graham Fry

Mr Fry told *CBW* that the company's site in Ticehurst village had been an obstruction to selling the complete business: "I had the feeling that it made the company too valuable to sell."

He said that instead, he decided to sell the goodwill to ensure continuity for its customers.

"It is sad when three generations of a family business have gone," said Mr Fry. "But it seems typical of what's happened in recent years - very few companies make it past the third generation."

During his tenure, Mr Fry has seen the demise of his tour programme, he says, because increased low-quality competition severely affected loadings to the extent that this cornerstone of Warrens's business ceased ten years ago. In recent years, it has concentrated on contract and private hire work.

The High Street site is likely to be sold for redevelopment, while all ten coaches - including a number of late Beulas EuroRiders - are being sold.

New owner of the Warrens 'book', Hams Travel, said the additional staff that come with the deal will help boost its turnover: "We have 45 licences but 60 vehicles," said MD Don Ham. "This could be an opportunity for us to expand." Hams runs a full range of work including schools contracts, private hire and contracts, from its two bases at Wadhurst and Benenden.

And the winner is...

Our month-long poll to get readers of *CBW* to pick their top coach of all time has reached a conclusion - and Plaxton's Paramount with the legendary Volvo B10M chassis is the winner.

The chassis undoubtedly influenced the voting, with some respondents saying they have gone for the Van Hool/B10M combination had it been in our top ten. But the runner-up was well ahead of third - and your choice was the Duple Vista/Bedford OB combination.

Third place went to the perennial Leyland Tiger chassis, which we'd combined with Plaxton Supreme. Behind that, the Bova Futura, a coach still being made today. The full rankings were:

1st Plaxton Paramount 3500/Volvo B10M
2nd Duple Vista/Bedford OB
3rd Plaxton Supreme/Leyland Tiger

Winner: Plaxton Paramount 3500

4th Bova Futura
5th Neoplan Skyliner
6th = Duple 425/Cummins L10
6th = Setra S215 HD
8th = Van Hool T8/DAF SB3000
8th = Duple Vega/Bedford VAL
10th Mercedes-Benz 0.303

Coming soon: The Top Ten Buses of All Time. Get your nominations direct to mark.williams@rouncymedia.co.uk, or fax 0845 280 2927. Letters to the address on Page 3

Harsh charges at the Hard

Portsmouth City Council introduced its threatened parking charges without warning at The Hard interchange last weekend.

The CPT had been led to believe the charges were being held back until the end of July when they were scheduled to meet the director of the city council to discuss the charges.

The CPT says it is extremely disappointed to hear that the charges have been introduced.

Pending the outcome of the meeting, operators are advised that charges vary from £2-£3.50 per set down or pick up, depending on whether the coach is pre-booked or is engaged on an educational or tourist trip.

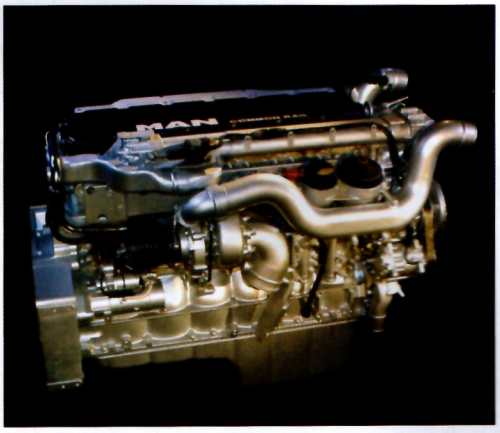
Operators can save a small amount on these charges by opening an account with the council. To set up an account, or for more information, telephone John Houghton on 023 9283 4619.

Crash kids okay

The children involved in a coach crash in the French Alps last week have resumed their holiday as planned.

The vehicle, subcontracted by STS School Travel Services, was one of two in the party and is believed to have suffered a tyre blow-out near Champagne early on Friday morning. Initial reports suggested the coach had overturned. In fact, it had crashed into the motorway barrier. Forty-five pupils and adults were on board at the time. Paramedics treated some children for minor injuries at the side of the road.

Neoman will skip Euro 5 for EEV



Ultra-clean: The Retro-modified MAN D20 engine

German bus and coach manufacturer Neoman intends to skip Euro 5 and move straight to the EEV standard with its urban buses, and it will not use SCR exhaust aftertreatment to achieve this.

Neoman chairman Wolfgang Fahrnberger made this claim while explaining how the coach and bus industry would ensure environmentally-friendly future mobility to an audience of Europe's top transport journalists at an IAA press conference highlighting the forthcoming bus and truck show in Germany.

Mr Fahrnberger pointed out that the MAN D20 common rail engine introduced in 2003 had been designed so it could be retro-modified to run on liquified petroleum gas, compressed natural gas or hydrogen. Running on gaseous fuels and with a catalysed exhaust system, it met the EEV standard. Particulate emissions were extraordinarily low, being less than 5 mg/kWh when the limit was 20 g/kWh. He was also confident that diesel-powered D08 and D20 engines would reach the EEV standard by the end of 2007 without exhaust aftertreatment. But Mr Fahrnberger warned that meeting Euro 6 would require all manufacturers to combine SCR and EGR technologies, if conventional diesel was to be used.

Castleways' first Volvo in a number of years and their first body from the Spanish manufacturer

Volvo for Castleways

Gloucestershire based coach operator, Castleways, have just taken delivery of a Volvo B7R Sunsundegui - their first Volvo for a number of years and their first-ever Sunsundegui.

The new coach features Volvo's D7C 275hp engine coupled to a ZF six-speed automatic gearbox, alloy wheels, 55 seats - all with three-point seat belts - and full air conditioning. It is being used for a range of private hire work.

Managing director, John Fogarty, who runs the company with his sister, Rowena, explains why they decided to look at Volvo again: "We were very impressed with the Volvo 7-litre engine and felt that the modifications to the chassis of the vehicle made it a better product. We also liked the look of the Sunsundegui. It's eye-catching and stylish-looking."

Today the 12-strong fleet specialises in private hire, corporate and conference business as well as tours for overseas visitors, particularly from the USA and Japan.

Preston pulls out of coaching

Employee-owned Preston Bus has pulled out of the coaching market, citing new regulations as a contributory factor. The company has always maintained a small fleet, and currently have only one vehicle, which is up for sale.

Engineering director Jack Hornby told *CBW* that the excursion programme had finished in June, and that new regulations such as tachograph rules and the working time directive were making it too expensive to carry on, particularly as there were no dedicated coach drivers and work could be allocated to any of the bus drivers.

The company says that day trips have proved to be popular and quite well used by its regular customers. Apart from being a day out for them they had become a social event and this point alone has made Preston Bus very reluctant to cease operating them. While the trips have been popular the company had not been able to attract sufficient other business to justify keeping the coach in the fleet.

Briefly

A generous donation from London Hire enabled a classload of pupils in Gravesend to enjoy a holiday on the Isle of Wight over half term. The company gave two minibuses to Sedley Primary School for the week, cutting the cost of the trip. The school's headteacher said: "This reduced the cost of the journey to parents immensely, allowing families who couldn't initially afford the trip to come along. We couldn't have done without the buses, so we'd like to thank London Hire for their generosity."

Following the death of Dave Beard, of Beards of Cinderford, some months ago, *CBW* is sad to report that his father Ken, who had been helping run the business since his son's death, also died last weekend.

Pop superstar Mariah Carey will be trying a tour bus for the first time on her upcoming American tour. "I'm doing something I've never done before," the singer said. "I'm doing the tour bus this time around. There will be much time for writing songs. It's an experience I've never had, and it will reconnect me, in a deeper way, to what's going on in the world – to what people are doing and thinking. I fall back in love with the recording process and the studio when I've been away from it."

NatEx passengers were said to be stunned when their Polish drivers asked for directions on the way to Warwick from Heathrow last week. A spokeswoman says the company was forced to use an alternative operator at the last moment and that the company has raised the issue with the operator.

A Czech coach on its way to Prague crashed into a bridge pillar at the weekend, killing six and injuring two others. The cause is unknown. Another Czech vehicle flipped onto its side in Austria a day later, injuring 21 people including two seriously.

Great spring deals at Haven parks for 2007

Haven Holiday camps are offering discounted prices for short breaks next spring at three sites across the UK.

Britain's first-ever holiday camp, at Caister, Norfolk, is 100 years old, but following a £16 million investment in Great Yarmouth, the whole resort has been totally transformed. For a half-board, four-night, midweek break in a two-bedroom chalet, the whole stay will cost just £35.

Set against the backdrop of Snowdonia lies Hafan y Mor holiday park. This highly-rated and prestigious caravan park combines quality accommodation with endless fun for only £30 for a half-board, four-night, midweek stay.

The spacious Ayrshire coast is the location for Haven's third discounted park. Craig Tara with its magnificent views of the ocean is also available for a four-night stay in half-board accommodation for £30.

■ These prices apply for arrivals on the following dates only: March 26, April 16, April 23, April 30, May 7, may 14 and May 21. Call 0870 242 1111.

DEALS OF THE WEEK

■ **Operators can buy a 'York Pass' which gives free entry to 29 attractions in the city and discounts to 11 restaurants and tours, until March 2008. For groups of 20 or more, operators get 10% off and for 50 or more the discount is 15%. One, two and three-day passes are available costing £19, £25 and £32 per person before discount. For more information ring Michelle on 01904 554471 or email *mb@york-tourism.co.uk*.**

■ **A group ticket to all ten Ironbridge Gorge Museums (see opposite), which can be used over six days, will cost £9.45 for adults and £8.25 for concessions this winter. Staff at Ironbridge can help tailor group visits to the ten sites to suit visitors and will also gladly offer advice on other attractions in the area. For information, contact Richard Aldred on 01952 435900.**

■ **Berlin's tourist board are offering discounts on more than 400 hotels and guesthouses for groups. A minimum of six people will receive 5% the cost of their stay. For information about hotel locations, availability and coach parking, call +49 30 250025.**

Helmsley Castle: Free entry with the 'York Pass'

The happy travellers pose outside their Bova Futura coach in Kristiansand, Norway

Exploring the Arctic

Forty holidaymakers have just returned from a trip of a lifetime. The passengers from Shropshire, Cheshire, North Wales and the Wirral have been on a three-week tour around Scandinavia.

The holiday was operated by Huxley Holidays, based in Threapwood, Cheshire, who have run the trip six times since 1991. The tour visited Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway and the spectacular North Cape, including visiting all four capitals of Copenhagen, Stockholm, Helsinki and Oslo.

The holiday, which has included guided tours, cruises and scenic coach journeys to reach the various destinations, enabled the passengers to experience the features of fairytales and some of the most breathtaking scenery of Europe. Particular highlights included crossing the world's longest road bridges to reach Copenhagen, the beautiful lit-up Tivoli Gardens, meeting the 'real' Santa Claus in Rovaniemi, crossing the Artic Circle and the opportunity to watch the setting and rising of the Midnight Sun.

Mrs Potter from Ruabon, Wales, a passenger on the tour, was delighted by the holiday.

She said: "My friends were booked on the trip and they kept telling me about it, so I decided to join them, even though I had never been on a coach holiday before.

"I'm really glad I did and now I'm looking forward to taking more coach tours in the future."

Mr Fred Huxley, who drove the tour and developed the concept for the holiday, said: "This holiday has attracted more interest this year than any other time we have run it and we are already taking enquiries about the same trip in 2007.

"The holiday really is the experience of a lifetime. Everyone comments on how much there is to see and how many happy memories they have from the trip."

Huxley Holidays are off on another European adventure on July 25, when 20 passengers are embarking on a trip to Russia.

Revisit the industrial revolution

Once described as "the most extraordinary district in the world", the Ironbridge Gorge in Shropshire is the birthplace of the industrial revolution With its ten award-winning museums, it is massively popular with tourists.

With competitive group rates available and so much choice, it's ideal for a day trip or an extended break.

One of the most popular sites is Blists Hill, a recreated Victorian town where costumed staff give visitors a fascinating insight into life in the 1800s.

Meanwhile, the interactive Ingenuity Museum is perfect for children.

Coming up at Ironbridge is a special group discount for groups of 20 or more at Blists Hill for Christmas lunch. Pre-booking is essential and costs £17.75 per person for the four-course meal with all the trimmings and entry to the village.

Group organisers should contact Richard Aldredon 01952 435900 or visit *www.ironbridge.org.uk*, which has information on accommodation and places to eat out.

Ironbridge: Birthplace of industry

Discover Peterborough

Peterborough Cathedral, surrounded by spacious lawns and a restaurant that overlooks the site is one of the many visitor attractions the city has to offer.

The Norman building is famous for its stunning west front and is steeped in history. The cathedral is finishing a massive renovation project after a fire swept through it in 2001.

Open all year round, private tours for groups can be arranged and coaches can drop off right outside before making the short journey to the coach park in the city.

Another sight worth seeing in Peterborough is Flag Fen, an archaeological display with 3000-year-old Iron and Bronze Age round houses. Educational programmes are available for school groups and evening tours can be arranged.

Peterborough cathedral's west front

Peterborough Museum is the place to find out about the interesting history of the area, from Jurassic sea monsters to the Romans, Napoleonic prisoners of war and up to the present day. Admission is free, but the museum is closed on Mondays.

There are also themed tours running throughout the year including inns and taverns of Peterborough, historic Peterborough, Peterborough ghost walk and Peterborough's monuments and memorials.

- Peterborough Cathedral: 01733 355300 or *www.peterborough-cathedral.org.uk*
- Flag Fen: 01733 313414 or *www.flagfen.com*
- Peterborough Museum: 01733 343329 or *www.peterboroughheritage.org.uk*
- Themed tours and other info: 01733 742611 or *Linda.wills@peterborough.*

Artist's impression of the illuminated QE2 bridge

Lighting up the Tyne

Newcastle will be the place to be this New Year's Eve with the launch of illuminations on the QE2 Metro Bridge between Newcastle and Gateshead pencilled in for December 31.

Artist Nayan Kullarni put the idea forward to the local arts council and Nexus, the public transport body who own the bridge, were thrilled with the idea.

Painting of the bridge will take place over the next six months and hopefully the structure will be fully lit with an ever-changing array of LED lights by New Years Eve.

Mike Parker, director general of Nexus, said: "This is the biggest new artwork in Britain – the bridge is a mighty structure that will now stand with pride among the pantheon of famous Tyne crossings."

Nayan's project has two main elements: a two-tone blue colour scheme, designed to change the daytime appearance of the bridge as seen from different angles, and the 142 LED panels with potential to create 16.5million colour combinations.

The lights will be programmed to send a continual stream of 'messages' – unique colour patterns derived from photographs sent in by the public – back and forth between Gateshead and Newcastle.

The lights will change brightness with the tide of the Tyne, being at their brightest at high tide

Funding for the project came from Nexus, who supplied £300,000 without taking a penny from their day-to-day bus operations, and a selected group of partners and local sponsors.

For operators interested in visiting the newly-refurbished bridge on New Years Eve, a guide for group hotel bookings can be found at *www.partyinnewcastle.co.uk*.

HOLIDAY POUND

£1 will get you:	
Euro	**1.45**
Switzerland *(Franc)*	**2.27**
Norway *(Kroner)*	**11.52**
Hungary *(Forint)*	**401.77**
Czech Republic *(Koruna)*	**41.23**
Poland *(Zloty)*	**5.85**

Briefly

One of the most popular tourist attractions in Wales was forced to call in the ghostbusters this week after staff and visitors reported hearing strange noises. The spooked folk at the National Showcaves Centre for Wales, at Dan-yr-Ogof in the upper Swansea valley, reported hearing the noises and the paranormal research team went to investigate. As the team moved closer into the caves they reported a dramatic drop in humidity and temperature. We await further news...

The Queen's Suite at Harrogate International Centre has been shortlisted as one of the finalists in the 'Yorkshire Tourist Oscars.' The Queen's Suite's ability to accommodate, in comfort, many different combinations of meeting rooms, coupled with state-of-the-art conference facilities, has led to increased business and helped it to maintain its position as one of the UK's leading venues.

The Tourism Society is to move from its head office in London to the headquarters of the Hotel and Catering Management Association, in Surrey. Flo Powell, executive director of the society, said: "This move will enable the society to instigate a new direction and a fresh start for the future." They will move on August 4.

Tourist website golreland.com has reported a 59% increase in bookings for the first half of 2006. The hotel and B&B sectors benefited most from the increase, with hotels enjoying a 77% rise and B&Bs 52% compared to last year.

Coronation Street stars John Savident (Fred Elliott) and Suranne Jones (Karen McDonald) are the big attraction at Manchester's Opera House over Christmas. The production of Snow White, with Jones cast as Snow White and Savident as the queen's henchman, is suitable for all ages. Freephone hotline for bookings: 0800 587 5007.

"Times They Are A-Changing" by Scania

"Those in the know have always recognised our vehicles as a class act. Durable. Reliable. Quiet, powerful engines. Good fuel economy.

But we're now stepping up a gear. Correction: several gears.

Our portfolio of innovative vehicles is expanding rapidly. (Watch this space.)

And, while our 90 strong UK network continues maintaining all our vehicles, 17 specialist centres have been established to handle the more complex procedures. The technicians in these centres are hand-picked and – for your convenience – all centres are strategically located near major routes.

Make no mistake. This company is fast becoming a major force in the UK bus and coach industry.

Want to know more about our future and yours? Then please do give me a call."

Geoff Bell
Bus & Coach Director
Scania (Great Britain) Ltd
e-mail: geoff.bell@scania.com
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SCANIA
Peace of mind™

COACH

Manufacturer	Jun 06	Jun 05	YTD 06	YTD 05
VolvoBus	13	29	287	259
Scania	12	20	137	93
Bova	2	11	65	47
Irisbus	3	17	55	102
Setra	4	0	61	35
Mercedes-Benz	3	5	47	19
MAN	1	2	30	23
Sitcar	1	4	26	20
VDL Bus	0	3	25	24
Caetano Toyota	0	4	10	25
Van Hool	0	0	8	5
Alexander Dennis	0	0	6	13
BMC	0	1	8	12
Temsa	0	2	0	2
DAF Bus	0	1	0	3
Transbus	0	0	0	3
Other British	0	0	2	0
Other imports	0	2	4	42
Total	39	98	774	727

BUS

Manufacturer	Jun 06	Jun 05	YTD 06	YTD 05
Alexander Dennis	42	76	441	353
VolvoBus	22	120	311	506
Optare	44	50	218	252
Scania	4	38	134	147
VDL Bus	16	2	100	68
MAN	9	2	93	19
Irisbus	30	7	137	78
Mercedes-Benz	3	4	60	43
BMC	8	1	61	42
Autosan	2	0	16	0
Transbus	0	1	0	11
DAF Bus	0	4	0	0
Other British	0	7	0	0
Other imports	2	0	11	2
Total	182	301	1593	1521

COACH AND BUS

Manufacturer	Jun 06	Jun 05	YTD 06	YTD 05
Volvo Bus	35	149	598	765
Alexander Dennis	42	76	447	366
Scania	16	58	271	240
Optare	44	50	218	252
Irisbus	33	24	192	180
MAN	10	4	123	42
VDL Bus	16	5	125	92
Mercedes-Benz	6	9	107	62
BMC	8	2	69	54
Bova	2	11	65	47
Van Hool	0	0	8	5
DAF Bus	0	0	5	3
Transbus	0	1	0	14
Other British	0	0	9	0
Other Imports	9	10	130	126
Total	221	399	2367	2248

Latest registrations: "Back to normal"

Faith school bus threat withdrawn

Northumberland Council has withdrawn its plan to cut free school transport to faith school pupils.

The cabinet considered the findings of the public consultation last Wednesday and decided to halt the plan, at least until the final version of the upcoming Education and Inspection Bill is published in the autumn. The council then plans a full review of its home to school transport policy.

Deputy leader Peter Hillman says: "We know it is highly likely that there will be implications for this issue set out in the new Education Bill, due to be published in the autumn.

"It would not be beneficial for us to change this policy now and then be faced with possibly having to change it again in accordance with the Bill later in the year. We need a wholesale look at all of our home to school transport policies when the Bill is out and we know what the impact of that is."

Despite having one of the lowest council tax increases in the country at 1.8%, Northumberland says it needs to save £30m in the next three years and has identified transport costs as one area for further examination.

Meanwhile, Wiltshire County Council is the latest local authority to consider withdrawing faith school transport. A public meeting last week was attended by 600 parents.

The council aims to save £420,000 per year by withdrawing the service. The Catholic Diocese in the area says it has taken advice from Queen's Counsel on the issue, and is considering its options.

Routes still under threat

After last month cancelling plans to withdraw certain school bus routes in exchange for a fare hike, Lancashire Council now says the services will be subject to another review in six months. The services were reinstated after protests from parents. The council says it will monitor passenger numbers after six months. One of the protestors says it is unreasonable to increase fares and expect people to use the service more, and that the decision leaves parent's planning "up in the air".

Registrations strong as digitach distortion fades

Bus and coach registrations are beginning to stabilise after a distorted last quarter caused by the introduction of digital tachograph.

Christopher Macgowan, SMMT chief executive, said: "Bus and coach registrations have now returned to the stable volumes and modest growth we saw up until a few months ago as operators scrambled to beat the May 1 deadline."

He remained cautious, however, about predicting what the rest of the year may show. "Euro 4 in October will upset the applecart again, making registration volumes in 2006 difficult to call," he said.

Bus registrations were up 4.7% on last year and coaches 6.5%. More than 4000 vehicles have been registered in the rolling year, a rise of 4.8% on the previous 12 months.

Briefly

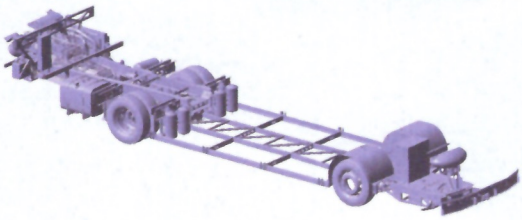
Three children escaped serious injury last week when an earthmover bucket crashed through the windows of their double-decker school bus.
The accident happened in Droylesden, Greater Manchester, last Tuesday. The bucket was raised as the bus passed by and smashed the upper deck windows.

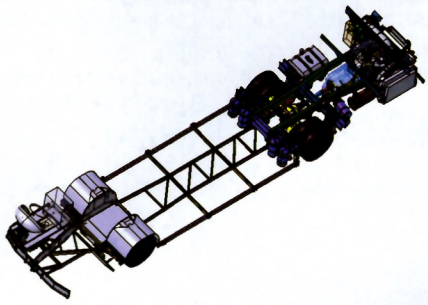
Protestors against the withdrawal of faith school transport were planning a rally outside County Hall in Hertford yesterday (July 18) during the first council meeting to consider the plan. The organisers say they expect around 2,000 people to attend. The multi-faith meeting will include an outdoor service. The final decision will be made on July 24.

The threat of a legal challenge has forced Swansea Council to perform a U-turn on its plan to cut post-16s transport in the city this year.
Protestors said they would take the council to court over the lack of a full public consultation on the issue – and a report to cabinet members warns that the council faces a "significant" risk that it would lose the case. The cabinet decided to postpone the cut until September 2007... and meanwhile carry out more consultation.

The state of the school bus fleet in the Irish Republic could determine the outcome of the forthcoming general election.
Opposition parties are threatening to turn the subject into an election issue. An election could be called for any time up until May 2007, although parliament is expected to be dissolved sooner than that.
Fine Gael politicians in Donegal are campaigning for the fleet to be modernised, made more recognisable as school buses, and insisting that all improvements should be made to private operators' vehicles too.

MAN enough...





MAN's reputation for sound engineering combines with East Lancs' attention to detail

East Lancs

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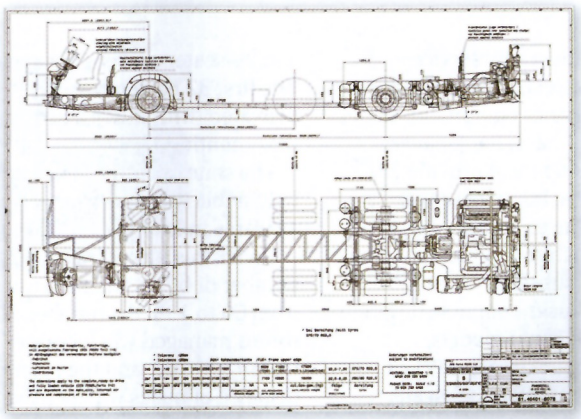

MAN
NEOPLAN

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WORLD

First into Europe?

First Group is poised to make its first foray into mainland Europe after formally expressing an interest in buying a stake in state-owned Dutch operator Connexxion.

The Dutch finance ministry got the go-ahead to sell two-thirds of the company at the end of May.

Connexxion, which employs 13,000 staff and turned over €870m last year, is on the market for between €400-500m.

A First Group spokesperson says: "It's very much in line with our strategy to move into Europe at the right time and with the right business - and Connexxion sounds like a very good fit."

The process began last November when the Dutch finance ministry submitted to parliament a plan to privatise the operator, which was approved in January.

The sale will take place by means of a "controlled auction", designed to protect existing contracts.

The timescale for the deal is uncertain according to a spokesman because of political upheaval in the country following the collapse and re-emergence of the ruling coalition.

According to the Finance Ministry, Dutch investment bank Rabobank is the only other party to have expressed an interest in Connexxion.

The remainder of the company will be sold in five year's time.

According to David Leeder, First Group's director of international development and marketing, the company wants to make Connexxion's Hilversum headquarters its European base, from where it can mastermind more expansion.

In its submission papers, First Group says that current Connexxion chairman, Peter Kortenhorst, will remain with the company.

Going Dutch: First Group bids for Connexxion

The Mercedes-Benz Safety Coach is part of a campaign targeting politicians, the public, the transport industry and insurance companies. It is aimed at promoting widespread use of safety systems and technology in commercial vehicles. The new Travego (pictured left) features a host of safety aids, including Lane Assist, Proximity Control, reversing camera, Litronic xenon headlamps, ESP, Continuous Braking Limiter and EBS. DaimlerChrysler is supporting the EU's 'Road Safety Charter' - which aims to halve the number of road deaths in Europe by 2010.

Bus aid to Africa

The buses donated to Rwanda by Japan as part of an aid package have arrived in the east African country.

The project is being undertaken in two phases. The first phase will see the Japanese Government provide 42 new large buses, 22 new medium buses and a new service truck with spare parts and maintenance equipment. Under second phase, the Japanese government will provide 28 new large buses next year.

The buses are all manufactured by General Motors subsidiary Isuzu.

The buses comprise different types of Isuzu models, including 62-seater MV123 passenger buses, 45-seater MV123 passenger/cargo buses and 29-seater passenger buses. The first 32 have now been delivered, with the rest arriving next month.

The state operator offers the only public transport service available in Rwanda.

Under this project, the total number of buses will increase from 60 to 153, the number of routes managed will increase from 73 to 162, and the running distance of buses will increase from 7,520 km to 14,850km.

Briefly

A criminal gang in Sao Paolo, Brazil, has targeted the city's bus system in a series of violent protests after its leader was transferred to a jail in a different part of the country. Its actions have brought the city to a standstill.
Last Thursday, only three of Sao Paolo's 16 bus companies ran services after 43 vehicles were destroyed by gunfire in the previous two days. Some 138 people have been killed in the violence since July 11, including 45 police officers.
The city relies heavily on public transport and has been paralysed by the attacks; 5.5m Sao Paolos use the bus to get to work each day.

General Motors is entering into alliances with retailers in America in order to drive up the availability of E85 fuel.
Eco-friendly E85 is an 85% blend of ethanol with 15% gasoline. One example of the General Motors sceheme is a deal with the Sheetz chain of convenience stores and VeraSun Energy, the fuel suppliers, in Pittsburgh. GM has sponsored the installation of the refuelling infrastructure. Since May 2005, the company has opened 160 E85 filling stations around the country.

The big news down under if from New Zealand operator InterCity, which has announced the introduction of "the largest bus in the country".
The Kiwi Bus Builders' double-deck is based on a Volvo B12B chassis, with a 430bhp engine. It is 4.25m high and 14m long – the largest dimensions allowed in New Zealand – and seats 70 people.
The company has ordered four of the beasts, at a total cost of NZ$2.5m.
The deckers will be used on the high-frequency route between Wellington and Auckland.

OPTARE

There's one part of an Optare bus that moves slower than the competition

Dramatically rising fuel costs are driving operators to look for vehicles that can deliver proven fuel efficiency. Strong low-weight integral construction coupled with industry-renowned heavy-duty drivelines mean that both the Tempo and Solo deliver class-leading power to weight ratios. Add to this electronically-managed performance and you have buses that are as fuel efficient as they are stylish and reliable. Indeed, our innovative designs, advanced engineering and precise balance of performance and economy ensure that every Optare bus looks as good on your bottom line as it does on the road.

Optare Group, Manston Lane, Leeds LS15 8SU Telephone 0870 033 0005 e-mail info@optare.com Website www.optare.com

Regional News

CBW takes a look at the big issues where you live in our round-up of the regions. If you've got a local issue you would like us to cover, contact Andrew Peace at *andrew.peace@rouncymedia.co.uk*

REP. IRELAND

Ireland's latest designer outlet mall has opened for business in a location which is set to make it a firm favourite for coach tour operators. Situated directly beside the M7 motorway, **Kildare Village** can be reached in less than a minute from junction 11 of the main route linking Dublin with Cork, Kerry and Limerick.

With 24 stores at opening, and another 15 due by the end of the year, Kildare Village offers visitors discounts of up to 60% on products from well-known names such as Levi, Nike, Reebok, Monsoon and Karen Millen. The centre is operated by the Chic Outlet Shopping Group, who operated similar outlet centres around Europe.

"We welcome coaches," staff at the centre told *CBW*, and indeed when our reporter asked about coach facilities, the customer service staff, assuming they were talking to a coach driver, immediately offered us an assistant to help us park our coach, and a guide to greet our passengers!

The outlet centre has been constructed in the style of a country village, with every building looking slightly different from its neighbour, Food choice includes a large Starbucks serving hot snacks as well as the usual coffees, and a slightly upmarket Italian resturant and winebar called L'Officina Dunne & Crescenzi. There is a children's play area, and the toilets are spacious and well valeted.

The complex is situated just 2 miles from two more tourist attractions: the Japanese Gardens and Irish National Stud, and a free shuttle service is provided between the locations.

Given the scarcity of service areas on the growing Irish motorway network, Kildare Village provides an excellent and interesting stop-off point for that longer coach journey to the south-west, as well being a very worthwhile day tour destination in its own right. See *www.kildarevillage.com* for details.

SCOTLAND

Cuts to post bus routes in Scotland have led to complaints from passengers, according to the **BBC** website. It reports that over half the post routes in Scotland have been cut in the last five years.

Royal Mail says that on average only one passenger per week was using the Glen Lyon, Perthshire, bus, which is the latest to be cut. It says that the postman's time is better spent delivering and collecting mail.

The post office says there are no plans to cut the post bus service entirely, and would be looking at each route on a case-by-case basis.

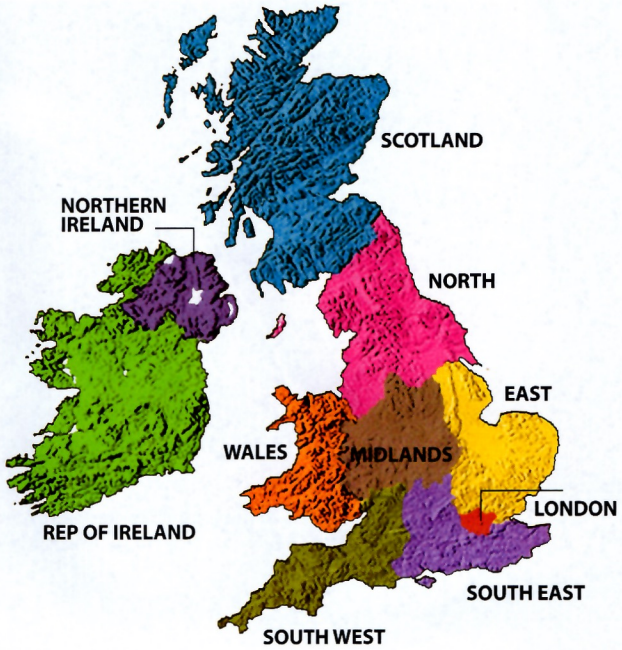
■ **Edinburgh** plans to have one of the most advanced tram systems in the world by 2011, at an overall cost of between £190 million and £240 million. The £50 million fleet of 20 trams will each be 40 metres long, making them the largest trams in the UK. Each tram will be capable of carrying 270 passengers and travel at an average speed of 43 mph.

NORTH

A bus route launched last year has proved so popular with passengers that the frequency of the service is to be doubled. Operated by **JP Travel**, and supported by **GMPTA**, the 486 route runs between Bury and Radcliffe. From the end of July, the frequency will increase to half-hourly in the daytime Monday to Friday, and continue to run hourly on Saturdays. JP Travel will put an extra vehicle on the route.

Mark Walsh, partner at JP Travel, said: "Having taken up the contract to run the 486 service back in September, we are extremely pleased to be in a position to introduce extra services just ten months later. We pride ourselves on running a dependable service with new, fully accessible buses. I hope that even more people will take advantage of these further opportunities to use the service."

FirstGroup has introduced its corporate branding into the Dublin market for the first time, with the allocation of of a number of new vehicles to a car park service at Dublin Airport



People coming to Manchester for a night out are being encouraged to take the bus home after Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Authority agreed to keep the city's Nightbus network running for at least another two years. More than 20 different services run from Manchester to locations across the county on Friday and Saturday nights, with many operating until 3.30am.

GMPTA spends around £125,000 per annum enhancing the commercial night network, operated by a number of operators in Manchester. In addition, separate networks exist in Bolton and Wigan. The PTA adds additional departures to the existing network, to ensure regularity and even frequencies, although the vast majority of departures are supported by the operators themselves.

The scheme, which was launched in December 2002, has proved to be extremely popular with people socialising in Manchester. At a meeting of the authority's transport network committee last week, councillors agreed to continue to fund it until at least July 2008.

MIDLANDS

Arriva has unveiled the first of a £10 million fleet of 54 new buses for Leicester.

The state-of-the-art buses will be phased in by the autumn, and will create 50 new jobs for drivers and engineers. The fleet comprises 46 double-deckers, at a cost of some £156,000 each, and eight singles costing £120,000 each. Arriva has

Briefly

■ **Suffolk County Council says bus use in the county has increased from 17.5m passengers in 2001/02, to 18.9m in 2005/06, an increase of 8%. A report says satisfaction with services has fallen but remains high compared to other authorities in the region.**

■ **A Stagecoach driver sustained three stab wounds as robbers stole his fare box. The incident happened last Tuesday in Little Houghton, Barnsley, as he was changing the destination screen. There were no passengers aboard. The stab wounds were said to be minor, although the driver was treated for shock. The service is operated by Peoples' Express.**

Briefly

A 'pre-vandalised' bus shelter has been installed on a street in Mickelover, Derbyshire. The council installed the stop as part of the city's Quality Bus Partnership Route. The council says the shelter was moved from a previous location, and that the failure to clean it was down to a "miscommunication". It says the shelters are checked every two weeks as part of the partnership agreement.

A recently launched rural bus route in Lancashire is set to be cut after an appeal from councillors only cut the subsidy per passenger journey from £75 to £65.

The West Craven leg of the Pendle Wayfarer is under threat after councillors issued a "use it or lose it" ultimatum earlier in the year, and streamlined the route to cut costs. But only 349 passengers were carried in the three months from the end of March. Lancashire Council's criteria for a viable subsidised service is £2 per passenger journey. The service is operated by Tyrer Tours.

A new busway that significantly reduces bus journey times without affecting other traffic has opened in Stockport town centre. Funded by Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Authority, and constructed by Stockport Council, it's the first of its kind in the UK. The 130-metre busway cuts through Portwood roundabout at junction 27 of the M60, halving the time it takes to travel from one side to the other during peak periods. More than 20 buses are expected to use the shortcut every hour. Buses travelling from the town centre are able to take advantage of the busway to reach Carrington Road, with seven routes already scheduled to use the roundabout.

promised that fares will not rise.

Each vehicle has CCTV cameras and they are being fitted with engines that run on biodiesel, made from vegetable and animal oils, to reduce pollution.

The new fleet comprises eight DAF SB 200s, 14 Volvo B7TLs and 30 DAF DB 250s.

Arriva managing director, Catherine Mason, said that the investment was meant to run alongside Leicester's massive city centre regeneration programme - thought to be the largest of its kind in the UK.

"We can see the potential for the city and we want to make sure we have a substantial bus service for that growth," she said.

One of the first to try out one of the new Volvos on a circular city route was 73-year-old Alan Farrar: "It's a lot more comfortable and there's a load more leg room," was Alan's verdict.

■ A bus passenger in Leicester had to be taken to hospital after being stabbed by another passenger, who he had asked not to smoke.

Michael Boateng was on the no 38 **First** service when a man sitting in front of him lit up. Mr Boateng - who suffers badly from asthma - asked the passenger to stub it out. The man then started to swear as the no-smoking signs were pointed out to him.

"He got angrier and angrier," recalls 37-year-old Mr Boateng. "And I suddenly heard another passenger say: 'He's got a blade'."

The man then allegedly lunged out, but Mr Boateng suffered a cut hand as he moved out of the way.

"I struggled to control the man," he says. "No-one was helping me. I don't know if they were afraid of getting into trouble, but that was disappointing. Someone told the driver what was happening and he stopped the bus and called the police."

A police spokesman said that one man was arrested at the scene on suspicion of possessing an offensive weapon, and has been released on bail. A First spokesman said the company is "looking into the incident".

■ Residents who campaigned to save Southam's market bus have been disappointed by the decision to withdraw it.

Villages in the Stratford district of Warwickshire are now without a public transport link to the town.

The closure follows operator **EG Skett** revealing that it had been losing £20,000 a year, due to minimal numbers of passengers.

EAST

A school bus carrying 29 children crashed into the gates of **Hatfield House**, witnessed by police officers.

The children were on a school outing when the bus hit the barrier, smashing the front of the bus. Last time this happened it caused £63,000 worth of damage to the stone gate pillars.

No one was hurt.

LONDON

Metropolitan Police officers working on **Operation BusTag** say they are pleased with the results of their latest 'Shop a Yob' campaign.

News Shopper magazine ran seven CCTV pictures of people who BusTag wanted to speak to in connection with vandalism on buses. As a result of the calls, the police have already made six arrests.

Roadworks

M2 Kent
Until October 9: One lane closed London-bound between J4 (A278) and J5 (A249).

M20 Kent
Until November 1: 50mph restriction both ways around J4 (A228).

M1 Hertfordshire
Until December 31, 2008: Speed restriction of 40 mph and narrow lanes both ways between J8 and J10.

M25 Waltham Abbey
Until December 31: One lane closed and 40mph speed restriction both ways between J25 (A10) and J26 (A121).

M4 Bristol
Until August 31: Roadworks both ways between J18 (A46) and J19 (M32).

M3 Hampshire
Current: Roadworks both ways between J6 (A30/A339) and J7 (A30).

M27 Portsmouth
Current: Roadworks eastbound at J12 (M275).

M5 Somerset
Until July 31: Speed restriction of 50mph between J19 (A369) and J20 (B3133).

M50 Gloucestershire
Current: 40mph both ways between J1 (A38) and J8 (M5).

M6 Staffordshire
Current: 40mph restriction both ways between J12 (A5) and J13 (A449) and J15 (A500) and Stafford Services.

M60 Greater Manchester
Current: Exit sliproad closed anti-clockwise at J8 (A6144).

M6 Cumbria
Current: Delays both ways between J40 (A66) and J43 (A69).

M8 Glasgow
Current: Roadworks both ways between J3A (A779) and J6 (A8).

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What the Committee saw Part 2

The second evidence session of the Transport Select Committee's investigation into bus services across the UK was the industry's chance to persuade MPs that no change was necessary. CBW reports...

The Plcs

The representatives from the five plcs had Mrs Dunwoody and Graham Stringer MP, the committed anti-deregulationist, to contend with, as well as John Waugh, transport services manager of the University of Southampton (responsible for UniLink).

He kicked off proceedings by contending that the attitude of the bus companies was the major factor in falling patronage. This "lack of involvement and lack of responsiveness" over five years led to the university insisting on the appointment of a manager (George Fair) who "shared our ideals", he said.

The committee quizzed the big companies about alleged excessive profits, with the chairman asking what margin was necessary to sustain a viable bus network. Dennis Wormwell, chief executive of National Express Bus Division, said it was 15%.

John Waugh said it was not "inappropriate" for companies to make profits, "but the nature of the industry is such that the efforts that are rewarded are the efforts of poor quality," adding: "We could make staggering profits for the university tomorrow if we were to operate in the same way as the rest of the bus operators do."

Peter Huntley replied that he could lay on the same level of service if he received the same compulsory levy from his customers as the students pay towards their bus service.

The chairman then asked about "strained" relationships between operators and local authorities. Mr Huntley agreed there was more to be done, which was why GoAhead has started talks with Nexus over a "third way" partnership that would achieve higher standards for customers. He said he has promised to resign if patronage in his area does not increase.

Talking of profit margins, Graham Stringer asked whether evidence from the PTEs that the plcs were making 25% returns were true. Dennis Wormwell interjected to say that Travel West Midlands margins, as published in the company's 2004 accounts, had been restated to include final costs and pensions, at just under 15%.

Louise Ellman MP

Eric Martlew

Clive Efford MP

John Waugh

Gwyneth Dunwoody MP

Mike Cooper, managing director of Arriva Regions, called the PTE figures "spurious", adding that his company made "dramatically lower returns in Manchester than we do in London".

Clive Efford MP then asked why there were no quality contracts.

"By quality contracts I take it that you mean effectively regulating our business?" replied Les Warneford, managing director of Stagecoach UK Bus, adding: "I do not see that a change in who decides the timetable is going to carry more passengers."

He explained that his company's sole motivation was to carry more passengers, but Mr Waugh argued that "the industry is all about running buses and they lose sight of the passengers."

He went on to propose that fuel duty rebate should only be given to operators with audited figures on reliability.

Returning to quality contracts, Mr Warneford said he could see "a period of serious upheaval and disruption in the industry" and "a considerable increase in public funding."

The groups said they would wait and see on whether to take legal action against a PTE trying to introduce a QC, with Nicola Shaw, First Group UK Bus managing director, saying there were arguable human rights issues.

Louise Ellman MP asked about levels of service deregistrations. Mike Cooper denied that Arriva cuts services that do not suit, saying 50% of changes in the last 12 months has been instigated by the local authority. Mrs Ellman then referred to a list of 36 changes to services on Merseyside "to the detriment of passengers" while Mr Cooper argued that service changes did not necessarily mean that passenger numbers would go down, saying that patronage on Merseyside has in fact increased.

Mr Wormwell interjected to say there are changes even on regulated networks, and that TfL made 146 changes in the first three months of the year.

Ms Shaw said a lot of changes were seasonal, or caused by roadworks. In Sheffield, roadworks had meant reduced services on peripheral routes.

"Congestion is the biggest single factor affecting bus usage," said Mr Wormwell, who added that he thinks deregulation has worked.

Mr Warneford said the industry could do more, which in Stagecoach's case means replicating the 4-5% growth in its more successful locations.

Mr Waugh said his organisation would never have been allowed to exist with regulation.

Geoffrey Leech MP said he thought operators did well to sustain rising patronage but "struggled where there is declining patronage" and asked whether operators abandoned declining services and concentrated on those that were improving.

Mr Wormwell replied: "We are all guilty of not doing enough to look at non-users... we do need to do more to understand the people who do not use us and have their own perceptions of the bus industry."

On performance data, Ms Shaw said First Group would be publishing data from September, while Mr Warneford said the reason they were reluctant to release the information was because "the media would use it as another reason to tell people they should not travel on buses." He added: "We can provide very factual information, but it will not be able to say that buses run 100% on time; they cannot."

Mr Stringer asked how he should respond to voters asking why subsidies were going up but patronage was declining. Mr Waugh said they should be directed to the local authorities. He found it "absolutely amazing" that authorities do not audit buses themselves, or buy surveys in.

Ms Shaw said cost increases were forcing tender prices up, while Mr Huntley wanted to clarify what counts as a subsidy, saying fuel duty rebate was only counted as a rebate to the bus industry, whereas airlines were allowed to buy fuel tax-free.

"I can assure you that this committee has lots to say about subsidy across the transport industry, whatever form it takes," said the chairman. She summed up the spirit of the proceedings when

she concluded: "We shall look forward to your homework, which we would like to receive quite quickly."

The traffic commissioner

The atmosphere was less tense as senior traffic commissioner Philip Brown sat down to give evidence. Nevertheless, the chairman asked almost immediately: "Do you think commissioners are fit for the purpose for which they are designated?"

Mr Brown called his powers a "halfway house", saying the weakness was over how he received his evidence and that "there needs to be a modernising of the way in which data is collected." He said operators should have to provide TCs with performance data.

A quick fix to the traffic commissioners' problems would be "a doubling or tripling" of staff to monitor bus services, he said. Adding that he has had several discussions with the DfT in the last year about making the TCs more effective, and that latterly they had been "fairly positive". A year ago he would have said the DfT was not engaged in promoting bus transport, but that "things within the Buses and Taxis Division have improved."

The chairman asked Mr Brown whether there was anything he could do to help prevent the deregistration of established services. He said he would exercise a power that did not allow deregistrations until an alternative had been found.

The chairman thanked Mr Brown and said the committee admired the work of the TCs.

The interest groups

Transport 2000's Stephen Joseph said he welcomed the committee's inquiry, but that it was "important to look at bus policy in the context of wider transport policy." He said that declining patronage is down to falling cost of car ownership and rising fares.

Keith Halstead, chief executive of the Community Transport Association, blamed the ending of initiatives like the Rural Bus Challenge for the decline in rural services, although he found it difficult to quantify as not enough information was available.

Tom Wylie from the National Youth Agency said price is the most important factor for young people, and said it was unfair that concessionary fares should be available only to older people.

On the Competition Act, Mr Halstead said sections 19 to 22 of the 1985 Transport Act must be "comprehensively" reviewed and updated to allow his members to extend services and develop more sustainable operations. Mr Joseph called for a specialist regulator to exercise competition powers, and the creation of a "Bus and Coach Standards Authority" to tackle passenger issues.

Keith Halstead

Mike Cooper

Philip Brown

Nicola Shaw

Stephen Joseph

■ **The full transcript is available at *www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/transport_committee.cfm***

Mr Stringer MP then asked Mr Joseph whether he accepted that "often, when there are bus priority measures, the bus companies reduce their network and concentrate on those major rail routes or roads." Mr Joseph answered that he had no evidence of a causal effect.

Then Mr Stringer asked: "Really what you are saying is more money, more bus priority, better practice, that kind of thing. Do you really think that this is all that is required to improve bus patronage in the English regions which have been in decline now for so long?"

The DfT

Gillian Merron, supported by Phil West, head of Buses and Taxis at the DfT, received a warm welcome. Mrs Dunwoody asked her: "Why do you think bus patronage is in decline?"

The government, according to Gillian Merron, blames falling patronage on rising car ownership and the quality of the service. "We have to make it an attractive proposition... available when people want it and of the right kind of quality. Where we do see successes it is exactly for those reasons,' she said.

"Having said that, if we look at London we can learn from them by the use of bus subsidy. Also, bus patronage has increased greatly because of the integrated approach from the political leadership."

Graham Stringer asked the minister whether she agreed with evidence given to the Public Accounts Committee in January by Sir David Rowlands, its head civil servant. He claimed Sir David had said that fleet age was not a problem, criticised the PTEs for not making the same choices as London and said he was 'agnostic' over the question of concessionary fares for young people.

Mrs Merron replied that free child fares were a good idea, but expensive: "Anything we can do to encourage bus patronage is a good thing, but it is always at a price and those are the kind of decisions we are going to have to take."

Later she added: "The age of the buses does indeed matter and it is something that has been an area of policy discussion."

Questions on the level of competition in the bus industry were answered by Phil West, although Mrs Merron echoed Brian Souter's recent statement that, "competition is also about competition between the bus and the car".

Mr West said DfT figures show there are around three bids per tender both in and out of London, and called the situation "manageable". He said the drive for bus companies to perform in areas where there was little apparent competiton was the threat of market entry from a competitor.

Clive Efford MP cited evidence from the PTEs regarding the lack of bidders. Mr West said: "You do not have to have a huge number of bidders to be able to influence the quality of the bids." "One would be nice," said the chairman.

Mr Stringer asked if the government's review was the start of a blue-skies consultation - or were there limits to the discussions and consultations because most of the facts of the bus industry had been known for a long time.

Mrs Merron replied that she was not about to pre-judge, but wanted greater reliability, quality and bus patronage, adding: "It is about finding the right framework."

She later admitted that the current framework was "not delivering quite as we would like."

On traffic commissioners, Mrs Merron said she was aware the committee had heard evidence that they were underfunded, but that this was essentially a question for VOSA.

She refused to comment on whether the government would consider transferring the commissioners' powers to the local authorities, but said the government would be examining the role of the traffic commissioner.

On the question of a national standard for driver training, Mr West said that it was "certainly an issue of importance to ministers... and may well be part of that work we are doing at the moment."

The chairman asked if "standards on training, enforcement and maintenance, are things you will be looking at?"

"Yes, you can be assured of that," said Mrs Merron.

On the short-term nature of some government funding, Mrs Merron said: "Where it is short-term, I would expect local authorities to work within that."

The chairman concluded by asking the minister specifically if the government would be thinking about ATCO's Quality Network concept.

She replied: "Obviously this is a group we would want to have to feed into our considerations."

by Grass Routes

Training drivers out of the business

Will the new CPC for drivers keep them on the ball or out of work?

From September 2008 the latest piece of well intentioned but poorly thought-out legislation is landing on the desks of hard pressed PCV operators - the Training Directive.

From this date a new driver will need to pass not only two hours of practical testing but also four hours of theory test (exam). Therefore the entry level will be set to discourage those people on whom we have relied for so long. Many drivers have the knowledge required to pass the theory exam. What they do not have is the skill and personal confidence to take a four-hour theory exam.

So, at a time when it is difficult enough to attract new blood into the industry the new rules will deter many of the young people who have been our lifeblood.

The older drivers, those who already hold a PCV licence, will not have to go back and pass the four-hour exam; but to keep driving they must complete 35 hours' training every five years. If this is perceived as 35 hours of going back to school many are likely to bunk off, just as they did all those years ago.

Many companies, my own included, already provide a rolling programme of training. This is carefully designed to suit the needs of both the staff and the company. Good in-house training programmes are appreciated by staff as relevant and important. They are usually fun sessions and importantly bear no resemblance to school. For some companies these schemes already lead to qualifications such as NVQ.

Without doubt it will fall to the operators to provide periodic training to ensure that today's drivers will still be licensed in five years. The driving force is a mixed ability group which includes not just Artful Dodgers, but graduates, late entrants who have moved from other careers and industries, migrant workers (many of whom have poor English skills) and many more.

With such a mixed group we might design tailor-made programmes carefully put together to match the needs of each individual: advanced tour guiding for one, English as a Foreign Language for another. More likely operators will just buy into whatever is available at the right time and never mind if the topic is relevant or important, the date and price being the determining factor.

I can envisage a situation where the same course is used each year. The point is that the drivers have to undergo 35 hours' training. They do not have to learn anything; they just have to be there. Asleep at the back counts as being there. There is no curriculum.

I dread to think how the industry will manage on September 1, 2013: large numbers of drivers with licences issued before September 10, 2008 will have done no periodic training and will have just eight days to complete their training and renew their licence - assuming Swansea offer renewal by return of post by then.

Government money is flooding into those quangos and agencies who seems best skilled at extracting yet more money from operators. If operators are to invest in this training the least we might expect is academic rigour:

- A curriculum which serves the needs of the industry
- Presentation of that curriculum in a manner which is relevant and accessible to all
- Effective development of those receiving the training
- Assessment of the value of training received but not in the form of the dreaded exams

Perhaps drivers might accumulate a record of achievement; this would record the topics that have been covered and the level attained by each driver. It is usually hardest to differentiate between those in the mid-ranges of ability, so perhaps with water as a topic we might set the following levels for the mid-ability groups:

2 - Recognises that vehicles need water and assumes someone will do it

3 - Recognises water filling point and adds water in an irregular and haphazard fashion

4 - Identifies water header tank and correctly reads level, adding water as appropriate

For those at the extremes of the scale clearly level **5** - walks on water and level **1** - passes water in a crisis...

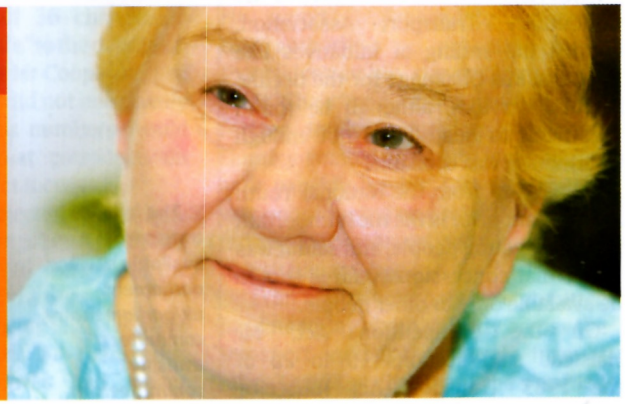
Grass Routes is a coach operator who has asked us to keep their identity a secret.

If you want to let off some steam, just tap away at the keyboard and send your rant (or carefully-reasoned views) to cbwinbox@rouncymedia.co.uk, or fax 0845 280 2927. Make 'Open Platform' the subject line. Alternatively, send your missive to: CBW, 3 The Office Village, Cygnet Park, Forder Way, Hampton, Peterborough PE7 8GX

IN NEXT WEEK'S ISSUE...

- Face-to-Face - Gwyneth Dunwoody on the bus industry.
- Alfa Travel - hotels first, coaches second
- Interiors Special - product focus

PLUS News, deliveries, products and more



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Need for weight watchers

Recent years have shown an ever-increasing weight of double-deck buses of some 50% - from 8 tons to 12 tons.

This has meant poorer fuel consumption, bigger tanks for the same operating mileage per day, and the need for improved braking levels. This all leads to yet more weight, let alone increased cost, together with ever-increasing fuel costs.

Since privatisation of the industry, the operator has concentrated on the core business, gradually allowing the manufacturer to take charge of design. Once upon a time we had basically three operators who were involved in design: Bristol for the Tilling companies, Midland Red for the BET federation, and LT in conjunction with AEC. Each was able to build into the design of their operating experience.

LT were able to play their part in the principle of integral design and thus save weight, yet produce a reliable vehicle. Also, the advantage of weight saving was to produce in aluminium, rather than steel, and get a better service life.

The split of the industry after privatisation has produced three or four companies who work on different ideas and makes it difficult to produce standard vehicles, let alone integral vehicles. Nevertheless it would be possible with one particular operator with central control to go a long way to standardise.

LT showed that it was possible to produce a Routemaster for country, green-line operation with a prototype rear engine. It was possible to employ different engines, transmissions, rear axle ratios as well as lengthened versions within the same basic shell.

The move to rear engines was brought about by staff difficulties - the advent of the one-man operated bus - and the idea was adopted without sufficient thought. Attention should have looked at other ideas such as the side-engined Q-Type. The passenger is continually facing fare increases and steps have to be taken to control this. One way the industry can help is to play its part in controlling continual weight increases and think more about integral buses in aluminium.

Much has been lost over the years, and the operator has to regain control of his purchase.

Colin Curtis, Vehicle Engineering Consultancy, London

LETTER OF THE WEEK

I read with interest your news story on the BBC programme Real Story. If any parent watched that programme they would not let your children travel to school on a bus.

As managing director of Belle Vue Manchester Ltd, the Company which employed Alan Johnson who featured in the programme, I can say I was utterly heartbroken when this story first appeared on my lap two years ago, and I am still the same today, 12 months after the story hit the headlines.

The press certainly imprinted one or two lessons on my memory over this story; they certainly have the ability to highlight some shaded areas and facts to portray a very bleak story.

My disappointment in the programme and the case with Alan Johnson is due to the real story at the opposite end of what the programme concentrates on. In Manchester, the Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Executive has invested hundreds of thousands of pounds on getting children to school on time and in a safe condition. The vehicles, training, parental contracts and operator dedication have reduced antisocial behaviour and is clearly a way forward for the future.

The scheme is highly successful. Our drivers (off our own back) have been CRB checked. However, Alan Johnson who featured in the programme was not CRB checked. You may ask why.

Mr Johnson was not CRB checked due to two reasons. The first reason is that he had been employed for five years by the company I purchased. He had been granted a Private Hire Drivers License by Manchester City Council for every year for a decade from 1992 until way past the millennium.

Furthermore, he had been put forward on many Special Needs Contract Tenders and passed for three times over a decade. If he was good enough for Manchester City Council he was good enough for us.

Secondly, the traffic commissioner, the DVLC, the local Council or GMPTE do not permit or enforce any governing body or operator to carry out CRB checks. Most responsible operators will do this as a matter of course.

VOSA and the traffic commissioner may well control Operator Roadworthiness but until a governing body is given the responsibility of enforcing CRB checks you may see further stories of this nature in the future which will continue to give the industry a poor reputation.

Philip Hitchen, Belle Vue Manchester Ltd

WIN A BUS! Sort of... Drop us a line and if your letter is chosen as our Letter of the Week, you'll receive a top-notch coach or bus model courtesy of our friends at Corgi. Please try to keep your letters under 200 words. The editor's decision is final.

Ahead of the game in Neath

I was interested to read your article in *CBW* June 14 concerning Hertfordshire County Council' efforts in the field of Criminal Records Bureau checking.

Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council has already widened the vetting requirement to include all local bus drivers, as they may be carrying pupils who either hold season tickets or pay fares on board. We repeat the checks every three years.

S R Colinese, Head of Engineering & Transport, Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council

***CBW* says: Last week's BBC TV programme Real Story added fuel to the fire, and underlined the need for consistency, not just across the range of services offered to children, but across the borough borders.**

Operators in border areas are faced with doing multiple checks when they cross the county boundaries. The potential for mistakes increases with complexity. Some traffic commissioners believe the CRB check should be added to the driver licensing requirement in a national scheme. Investing, for example, in a duplicate licence at the start of a contract (thereby updating the licence) at £19 would seem a worthwhile investment.

***CBW* is the only paid-for weekly news magazine for the coach and bus industry. Each week the magazine provides a unique insight. Your views are always welcome. Write to the editor at the above address**

Don't blame the coach

We know it's all over... and we didn't win. We commissioned this piece for our triumphant World Cup-winning issue. But then there were penalties... again. Alex Griffiths reports from Germany

When Alois Griesgraber turned 60 in June, little was he to know of the birthday gift that lay in wait for him.

Griesgraber, an experienced driver with the Munich-based Bus Oberbayern, had been loving every minute of his once-in-a-lifetime stint driving the England World Cup bus, not only in Baden-Baden but for every match and training session.

Despite the consistent encouragement of Sven Goran Eriksson, the shy if not quite retiring Griesgraber - christened Lewis by the players because they could not pronounce his other names - had shunned the opportunity to act as "one of the lads".

Having driven the German national team and possessing a CV laden with the transport of homegrown celebrities, Griesgraber was still not not one to take liberties, and thus stopped himself requesting Ebay-friendly items from any of the English, be they staff, players or, indeed, the notorious WAGS.

"I don't like asking them for any souvenirs or autographs because I think this is not correct when working with them," he explained. "But on June 16, which was the day of my 60th, all the England players came to my bus and cheered. Then they presented me with a shirt signed by all of them which had the number 60 sewn on the back!

"It was typical of them, because they always tried to make me feel part of the team. Those few weeks really were the highlight of my professional life."

He had worked in England many times before, so he thought he knew what to expect, but even Griesgraber was surprised when he heard the call from the back to slow down on the way to one game: "When driving to Stuttgart, they were telling me to slow down a bit. I thought they meant I should go slower just because the weather wasn't that good.

"But that was not the reason... a group of girls in a bus realised that they were parallel to ours and they started to open their blouses a bit more..."

Discrete as ever, Griesgraber leaves it there, and insists there was no earwigging going on while he was on the job, either.

"The players were towards the back so I could not hear what they were talking about most of the time, even if I wanted to."

And what about the little luxuries that come with a World Cup upgrade? "I really don't know about extras, as all the buses for the tournament were new and I'm just the driver. All the team buses were the same - only the Netherlands decided to install two additional tables for playing cards."

So forget all those thoughts of bells and whistles, folks, inside the coach at least. Yet their own modifications notwithstanding, it appeared that the Dutch - never the happiest of football campers in the first place - got all upset over the slogan that was emblazoned along its livery.

"Orange turning to gold" went the legend, and Marco van Basten actually went so far as to complain about it at press conferences. A week after the story broke, your reporter checked with Dutch defender Johnny Heitinga whether or not it was all now water under the bridge. "No, it's not," Heitinga replied. "You see, he thinks that it makes us look arrogant. We did not decide what slogan went on our own coach, that was the sponsors, and we think it makes it look like we are typical big-headed Orangemen!"

Indeed, Hyundai was responsible for the provision of all official transport even though, as one senior local organising committee figure confided: "There IS no such thing as a Hyundai bus!" What was on offer was a Mercedes-engined Setra S415GT-HD model that, according to

Above: Hyundai don't make coaches. But if they did they would probably be like Setras, as used by the England squad while in Germany 2006. Below: The sponsor's boastful slogan on the Netherlands coach made the orangemen see red rather than gold

someone who should know, was some way off even Premiership standard!

Thomas Hitzlsperger, now of Stuttgart, and fresh from a dash down the wing in the hosts' victorious play-off against the Portuguese, used to play for Aston Villa and was happy to scotch all talk of upgrades.

"It was surprisingly basic, actually. Some of my best memories are from the coach, but it was not because of any luxury but because for the last two or three games we were able to sing traditional songs and get the beer out!

"The fans made it a party and it took much longer leaving after the Argentina, Italy and Portugal games because people blocked the way and were very happy to see us and take pictures."

His own Premiership days, when he played under manager John Gregory, Graham Taylor and David O'Leary for perennial Midlands strugglers Villa, had provided a contrast in player pampering.

"Yes, I know the Villa chairman has a reputation for being careful with his money, but he made sure we had the best."

Had the worst come to the worst and England's bus broken down on the autobahn, one friend of goalkeeper David James was on call not so far away, in the imposing shape of Marcus Hahnemann, third choice 'keeper for the USA. Hahnemann's mechanical skills were more in demand than his goalkeeping ones last season when Reading FC's bus broke down on the way to play Hull City.

Stuck with the driver's solitary screwdriver, it took him two hours to fix the fan belt and Hahnemann recalled after watching his team crash out in the first round in Germany: "I'm taking my tools into the Premiership with me so we won't have the same problems! I've got my socket set, ratchets, a full set of screwdrivers and a couple of wrenches - the big stuff.

■ *Thanks to Keith Cooper, Roland Renner and Thomas at autobusoberbayern.*

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Coaches were different in 1966 – and we don't just mean Sir Alf Ramsey versus Sven Goran Eriksson. This is the transport enjoyed by the England squad that actualy went on to lift the World Cup. On that occasion the coach driver was also given a signed shirt – driver Sid Brown was presented with Martin Peters' spare shirt from the final by Bobby Moore. That particular trophy recently turned up at Christies with a guide price of £1,500. So perhaps Herr Greisgraber's birthday present could prove to be a decent tip for his month's driving!

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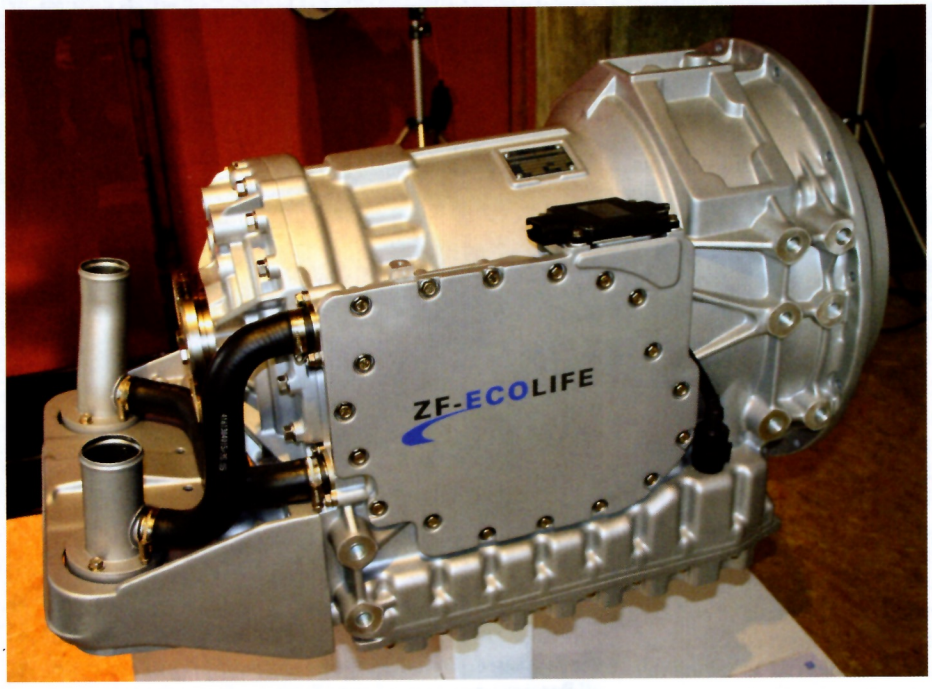
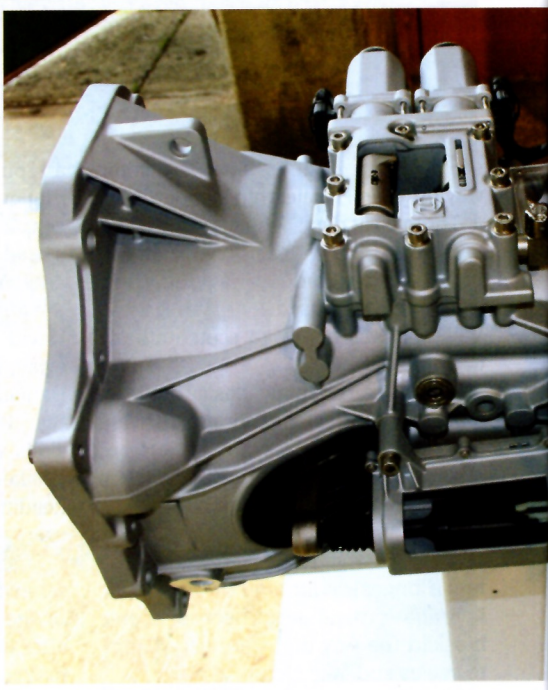




Above: The new ZF EcoLife automatic is lighter, quieter and more efficient, bringing new self-adaptation technology through integrated Topodyn programming. Above centre: ZF's eTronic automated manual has been adopted by Iveco and another big announcement is expected shortly. Above right: Latest version of ZF's AV132 portal drive axle with Super Single tyres – developed for BRT systems

ZF gears up for the future

German gearbox giant ZF is updating its range at this year's IAA exhibition. Martin Cole had a sneak preview

Gearbox and transmission specialist ZF is to replace its time-served Ecomat automatic transmission with a new EcoLife unit – which will be introduced at the IAA exhibition in Hanover.

Other new technology includes a hybrid drive system incorporating electro-dynamic stop-start, which already promises at least 10% fuel savings, a new e-Tronic automated manual for lighter vehicles, a new axle system for Bus Rapid Transit application and improved power steering to complement independent front suspension.

ZF has also introduced a number of upgrades to existing products, developed independent front suspension with CDC and a new 12-speed manual gearbox for trucks.

EcoLife

After 26 years and a history of continued development, the Ecomat automatic gearbox is to be phased out as the new EcoLife units come on stream in 2008. EcoLife offers a new platform designed to meet foreseeable applications and contain the flexibility to be developed to meet future requirements.

The original Ecomat started life as a four-speed unit and is currently available with up to six speeds and double the capability. However, with continued drive towards larger engines with increased power and torque, ZF has gone back to the drawing board to create a new platform capable of accepting input torque of up to 2,000Nm.

ZF says not only has it increased the design life of EcoLife by 40%, it has also taken economy and ecology into consideration through increasing retarder capability by 50% and extending oil change intervals. Improved retardation means more braking can be done without involving the foundation brakes, so there is less brake wear and far less brake dust finding its way into the atmosphere. Less brake wear means lower costs for operators – as do extended oil change intervals – apart from placing less demand on dwindling natural resources. A change to helical-cut gears also cuts noise emission.

EcoLife comes with six gears as standard and it features an advanced cooling system with two separate heat exchangers. The transmission unit is lighter than the Ecomat, but the weight of the heat exchangers, now constructed from stainless steel, adds around 15kg to the existing package. ZF says the weight will be reduced by the time it is commercially available.

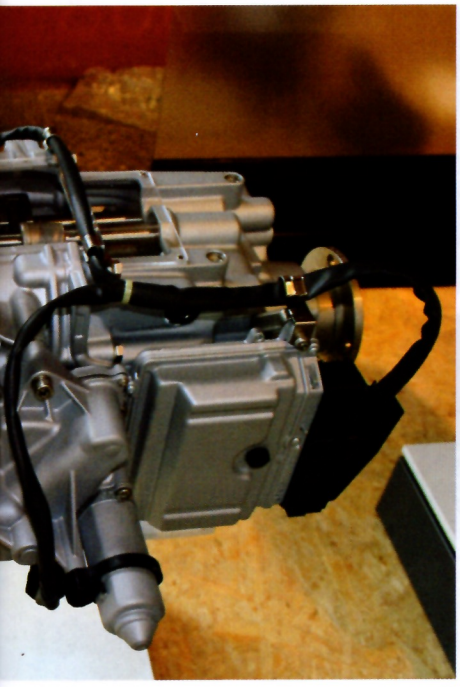
In addition to a higher input torque capability, the input drive features an integrated torsional damper to absorb input vibration through the torque converter. ZF claims this aids fuel consumption by up to 1.5%. EcoLife will also transmit 25% more torque.

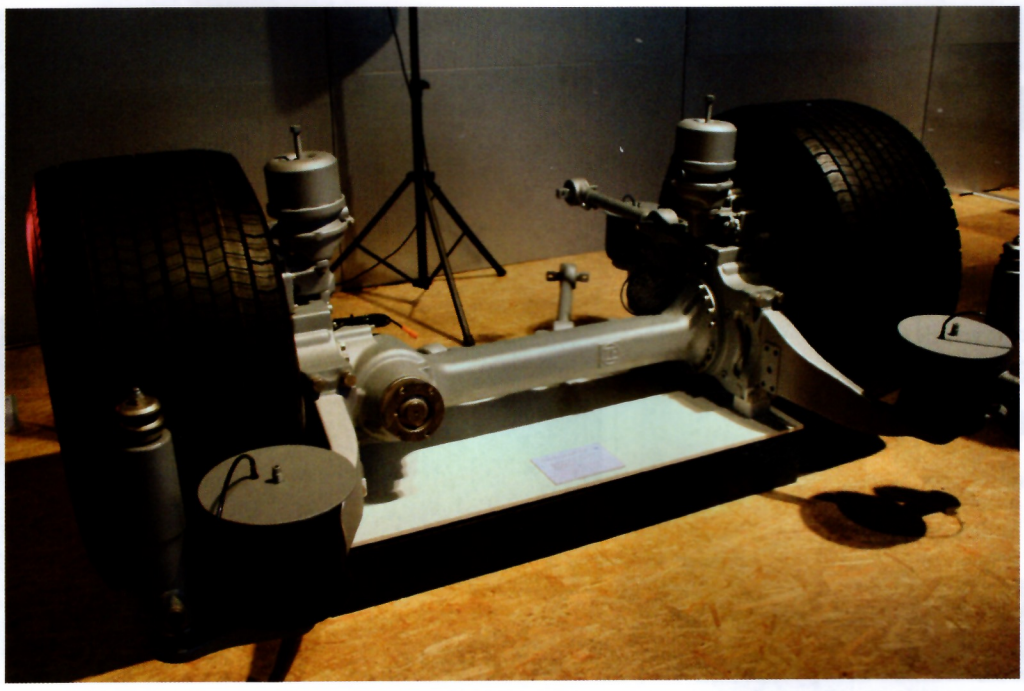
One of the clear attractions of the new EcoLife is its Topodyn dynamic shift programme. Electronic control functions monitor the attitude of the vehicle and adapt the shift patterns continually. This means the Topodyn unit will assess not only how the vehicle is being driven, but take the local topography, flat or hilly, into consideration and adjust the change points accordingly.

In practice, the EcoLife senses when the driver needs additional power and will hang onto changes until 2,000rpm to deliver the performance required, but if it senses the vehicle is cruising or has little load, it will alter the change points to 1,200 or 1,400rpm. These figures are an example and programmes can be completely flexible.

During my test drive with the EcoLife, it was possible to observe the programme shifts through a computer screen placed in the vehicle. On downhill or flat running the unit operated mainly in 'Eco' mode, depending on throttle demand, but on steeper uphill sections it switched through a sequence of programmes until it arrived at 'Super Power'. The good thing about Topodyn is that it is self-contained and requires no outside intervention such as GPS or transponders in the road.

The programmes can be adjusted to suit specific engines and a number of options are likely to be available. The





EcoLife is primarily aimed at being fully on stream ahead of Euro 5 introduction in 2009.

ZF says EcoLife will initially be available in five models with input torque ranging from 1,000 to 2,000Nm. Each will offer lower operating costs and provide 5% fuel savings.

e-Tronic

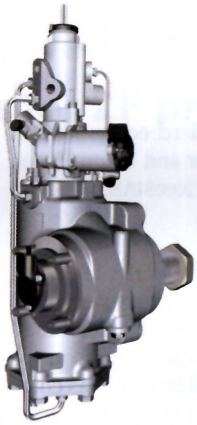
e-Tronic is a six-speed automated manual gearbox with electro-mechanical operation. It was developed to provide a reliable, cost-effective transmission for light CVs and vans/minibuses, up to 7.0t, which offers low lifecycle costs, improved driver comfort and is difficult to misuse.

The e-Tronic is also suited to hybrid drive application. It is currently used by Iveco in the Daily and marketed as the Agile gearbox. Other manufacturers are in negotiation with ZF over its application and it is hoped a new partner will be announced at the Hanover event.

AS-Tronic

It is now ten years since the launch of AS-Tronic - the first automated manual transmission for heavy vehicles.

The newly-developed versions can accept 33% more power, weigh 5.0kg less, produce less noise and feature reduced power losses. Integrated electronics and advanced programming have been added to the new 12-speed package with dramatic affect to the shifting procedure, which is now so smooth it gives the impression of riding in a vehicle equipped with a fully automatic torque converter gearbox. The latest versions are also equipped with a hill-hold function which prevents the vehicle rolling backwards and gives the driver ample time to transfer the right foot from the brake to the accelerator. A stainless steel heat exchanger is now fitted to avoid problems with corrosion. ZF says AS-Tronics are finding their way into many applications and there are many places where antifreeze, particularly the type with a corrosion inhibitor for use in aluminium engines or radiators, is not available. The stainless steel unit will be more tolerant.

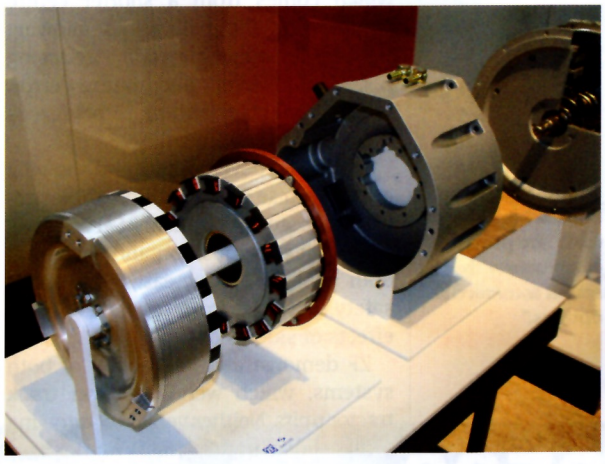


Above: ZF's ServoActive steering system control. Below: ZF's parallel hybrid drive system

Parallel hybrid drive

Favouring a parallel hybrid drive approach, ZF has developed a range of drive system components for manufacturers to adopt into their own design programmes, or to incorporate a complete ZF hybrid drive train. The company says it has been careful to ensure the components offer commercial benefits in terms of fuel savings and longevity, sufficient to amortise the added costs of hybrid technology without aid from government incentives or grants.

The company says it can guarantee fuel savings of 10%, which it describes as a conservative estimate.



The system utilises what it calls an electric machine - essentially a synchronous electric motor rated at 70kW and with a peak output of 90kW. Its compact design means it can be incorporated into a fairly conventional bell housing and connected to a standard transmission without the need for synchronisers, reducing costs.

It is produced in a self-contained package, containing clutch actuators, for the Mercedes-Benz Sprinter hybrid and is installed between the engine and transmission. The drive is claimed to be so powerful it offers the same high performance level as the engine.

This year's IAA will see the launch of a ZF hybrid drive installed in an MAN delivery truck. The prototype vehicle was available to try and performed admirably at the test facility. Part of the hybrid's function is the incorporation of EDA - electrodynamic starting, where it uses stored energy to start off before transferring drive to the engine - avoiding the typical period of high fuel usage normally experienced in pulling away. This is why ZF believes the parallel hybrid route to be the most suited to delivery truck operation or to stage carriage work where the stop/start nature of the business creates high fuel consumption and greater contribution to pollution of local air quality.

Another function of the electric machine is its capability to function as a crankshaft starter generator, avoiding the need for a conventional starter motor. This has additional possibilities when incorporated into the hybrid package because it allows a stop/start function which cuts the motor as soon as the vehicle has stood idle for more than three seconds.

Pulling up at a junction or in a traffic queue, with the system engaged, will automatically stop the engine if the brakes are applied and neutral selected. Depressing the clutch pedal immediately restarts the engine and the vehicle is ready to move by the time a gear has been selected, cutting fuel consumption and reducing emissions.

BRT axle

ZF's AV132 portal drive axle has been around for ten years but continually undergoes development. The latest version to emerge is specially designed for use on BRT - bus rapid transit - systems and configured to run on Super Single tyres. Combined with a low 405mm height and lowering suspension, it allows fast, simple boarding and alighting with more space available between the drive wheels.

ZF says the increase in passenger flow cuts time at stops and ensures BRT systems can function quickly and efficiently to give them a positive advantage over urban traffic.

CDC

ZF's independent front suspension systems have been implemented on coach and bus for some time and this year the company is aiming to show its benefits to the truck world.

The latest developments include the availability of CDC - continuous damping control - which is electronic control of the damping functions. Coaches and buses have benefited in terms of ride quality, roadholding and manoeuvrability, but the addition of CDC improves this further and adds a very strong element of vehicle safety. It was developed by ZF Sachs.

ZF demonstrated this quite graphically using two articulated trucks. One was fitted with CDC and the other was not. The vehicles were otherwise identical and carrying the same load.

Driving in a straight line at 40km/h, the vehicle was asked to swerve sharply left, right and left and then to brake hard - a scenario often encountered on normal roads to avoid cars pulling out or children dashing out from between parked cars. The situation, from the passenger seat, in the CDC-equipped vehicle is a little uncomfortable as you can feel the weight transfer from direction changes trying to counteract the steering. However, in the non-CDC vehicle the same manoeuvre, at the same speed is bordering on very frightening and the driver insisted that if that move was carried out at just one or two km/h faster, the truck would be lying on its side.

Far left: Independent front suspension with CDC. Top left: Truck fitted with CDC handles violent swerve safely. Bottom left: Truck with CDC, at the same speed, is considerably less stable

The show

The IAA takes place in Hanover from September 21-28. ZF will have examples of all this technology on its stand, along with technical experts who can fully explain their application.

The company says it only pursues technology which will offer its customers value for money and guarantees a payback during a reasonable period – through increased economy or high reliability and reduced downtime. Wolfgang Schila, head of ZF's bus and coach transmission division commented: "One of our key customers, having been informed of the higher price attached to new gearboxes, said: 'I am not so rich that I can afford to buy cheap,' and we aim to prove our products offer lower whole life costs and provide customers with sound commercial options."

The system works by reading from sensors positioned around the vehicle and transferring all movement-related data to the control unit, where it is instantly assessed and acted upon. The result is it can detect sudden changes in direction and immediately stiffens the damping on the appropriate suspension unit to counter a diving effect. As a result, the vehicle remains very level and consequently much more stable and easier to control.

CDC is now standard equipment on the Neoplan Starliner and an option on other coaches in the NeoMAN line-up.

New trends

Much development work is being undertaken by ZF Lenkesysteme - a joint venture between ZF and Robert Bosch - on vehicle steering and control. Already from this association has come a space-saving steering system design called Servoline, which is a linear design configured to contain advantage of rack and pinion power steering function, yet work with independent front suspension.

Reduced tyre wear is one advantage which comes from a shorter centre distance of the ball joints allowing the use of longer tie rods - reducing Ackermann error and bump error. Steering is lighter and more precise as there are fewer joints.

Still under development and showing great promise are two different electro-hydraulic steering systems: Servoactive, with angle superposition, and Servotwin. Both units offer increases in vehicle safety, not least from resistance to the effects of sidewinds.

ZF demonstrated the ability of both systems, which were fitted on truck tractor units. Neither vehicle was towing a high-sided trailer which would have made the wind effect far more dramatic - as would a full-bodied bus or coach. The test course involved normal cruise speed driving at one point passing a group of wind machines blowing a 75km/h gust across the road.

The effect on both vehicles with the system inoperative was to cause them to veer sharply by anything from half to one metre. Repeating the pass with the system active brought a marked resistance to the swerve.

The driver-independent interventions available to Servoactive, thanks to the extension of the Servocom steering gear with a superposition gear system, electric motor and a Servocomtronic valve, include tracking mode, cross wind and track groove compensation, yaw rate compensation to keep the vehicle straight under braking when offside wheels may be on a different surface to the nearside wheels, compensation for errors in steering geometry, reduced possibility of overturning and aid in avoiding obstacles.

Steering interventions include a speed and load-dependent steering assistance for positive feel at low and high speed, and a speed-sensitive steering ratio, which is reduced for higher speeds and vastly increased at low speed to aid manoeuvrability.

Servotwin provides similar but fewer functions. It maintains the tracking mode and crosswind and track groove compensation, plus the speed and load dependent steering assistance. The special feature is its ability to self-centre to the straight ahead position.

Servotwin is fitted ahead of the main hydraulic power steering and can assume a substantial part of the steering assistance if hydraulic power fails. On long hauls, hydraulic power can be cut and the electric Servotwin motor will carry out the necessary functions - saving fuel.

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Football fans: driven to drink?

New changes to the rules concerning drinking alcohol on public transport are likely to impact on operators. Miles Dorrington answers some of your questions

With World Cup fever cooling but the prospect of increased alcohol consumption as the new football season approaches, it's a sobering exercise to consider some of the more serious issues concerning alcohol and coach trips to any association football match.

After the revision to the Carriage of Passengers to Designated Sporting Events Voluntary Guidelines, the rules are slightly changed. This week we answer the kind of questions that get asked, to iron out the issues...

Q **I received a call to take a coach load of supporters to a Premiership football match in London last week. When we arrived I could see some trouble outside of the ground and I was turned away by the police, who told me I hadn't notified them I was coming. Why is that? TG,** Cheltenham

A Unfortunately the police liaison officer at the match destination needs to be contacted at least 48 hours before the event and you need to let them know the number of supporters expected to travel and the number of coaches that have been booked. As you hadn't done that, the police were within their powers to turn you away.

Q **I received a call booking two of my coaches to take 60 fans to an FA Cup match. The fans wanted to take their own drink on to the coach as it is quite a long journey. I know that I am not allowed to knowingly let anyone take alcohol on those journeys, but they are insistent. I can't afford to turn the booking down and want to compromise by letting them stop for a meal and a drink along the way. Is that ok? RF,** Cambridge

A You are quite right not to allow alcohol on to a coach that is travelling to an football match such as this one. To do so could lead to you being prosecuted for contravening the regulations that apply.

However, you are allowed to stop at premises where alcohol is sold *only* if the alcohol is sold ancillary to a substantial meal. You should look to get agreement from your local police liaison officer beforehand and if it is given you should make it very clear to the passengers that alcohol can only be drunk at that premises with a substantial meal.

You might also consider the commercial benefit of a group booking of a set meal - for everyone - en route, which can be profitably sold to your group as an added-value package.

Q **I have driven coaches to football matches on several occasions and am aware that alcohol cannot be carried or drunk on the coach. On a few occasions I have suspected people had been drinking and then last week I saw a passenger with a bottle concealed under his jacket. I asked him to hand the bottle over but he got aggressive and I did not challenge him further. Was that wrong? WR,** Birmingham

A The rules state that alcohol must not be carried on coaches travelling to or from designated grounds and that drivers shall, as far as reasonably practical, supervise boarding passengers and check that they are not obviously carrying alcohol.

Drivers are not expected to carry out searches to bags or to a passenger's person and they are not expected to confiscate alcohol or to remove passengers without police assistance. If something like this happens again, I would telephone back to base who in turn can telephone the police on your behalf to advise and assist.

Miles Dorrington is in charge of the Road Transport Team at Bond Pearce solicitors. He is a dual-qualified barrister and solicitor specialising in all aspects of passenger transport work. He regularly appears at public inquiries and before the courts for operators and drivers and can be contacted on 0845 415 6722 or by email at miles.dorrington@bondpearce.com

Q **I took a full coach of passengers to London and all but five were travelling to a 40th birthday celebration. The other five passengers were going to a Premiership football match very close to where the party was taking place. There was some drinking on the coach, but only by the partygoers, who were dropped off first, half a mile from the stadium. The police took a dim view and are now threatening to prosecute because alcohol was being carried on a coach travelling to a designated football match. Can this be right? MO,** Swansea

A It is an offence to knowingly allow the carriage of alcohol on a PSV that is being used for the principal purpose of carrying passengers for the whole or part of a journey to or from a designated football match.

It therefore seems that part of the journey being undertaken by the coach (and the five football fans on it) had the principal purpose of going to the football match.

Unfortunately this means that the Police are right in their initial approach as this part of the legislation is designed to avoid people trying to get around the strict rules.

You might want to explain your misunderstanding to the police in an effort to persuade them not to take the matter any further.

Here we go... but these football fans shouldn't be carrying any alcohol as they head for the match

Q **I recently took fans to a match where the police entered the coach and found several passengers had been drinking. There was no prosecution but I have now received a letter from the traffic commissioner asking me to explain what happened. What might happen? CR,** Woking

A All operators are asked to comply with the guidelines on a voluntary basis, but the police can inform the traffic commissioner of any failure to follow them. The traffic commissioner can then consider applying the guidelines as a formal condition to your operator's licence. If you failed to comply with them again you could find yourself being called to public inquiry.

What the guidelines say...

Section 1 (1) of the Sporting Events (Control of Alcohol) Act 1985, as amended by the Public Order Act 1986, prohibits the carriage of alcohol on a PSV that is being used for the principal purpose of carrying passengers for the whole or part of a journey to or from a designated sporting event. A "designated sporting event" generally means any association football match, whether national or international. The full legal definition of "designated sporting events" may be found in The Sports Grounds and Sporting Events (Designation Order) 1985, as amended by SI 1520/1987.

It is an offence for an operator of a PSV (or his servant or agent) knowingly to cause or permit the carriage of alcohol on journeys to which these regulations apply.

In addition to these statutory provisions, the police have asked that operators comply with the following guidelines when conveying passengers to such sporting events:

- Coach operators taking bookings from groups of supporters are to notify the police liaison officer at the destination, at least 48 hours before the event, of the number of supporters expected to travel and the number of coaches booked.
- Coaches are not to stop within ten miles of the venue either en route to or on departure from the event unless prior agreement is obtained from the local police liaison officer.

- Unless directed otherwise by a police officer, coaches may stop at premises where intoxicating liquor is sold only if it is sold ancillary to a substantial meal. Prior agreement for meal stops where alcohol is available should be sought from the operator's local police liaison officer.
- Coaches are to arrive at the venue no earlier than two hours before and not later than one hour before the scheduled start of the game, unless otherwise directed by police.
- Coaches are not to set down or uplift passengers at any unauthorised locations without prior permission of the police.
- Coaches must leave the venue within one hour of the finish of the event.
- Intoxicating liquor must not be carried on coaches travelling to or from designated grounds. Operators will draw hirers' attention to the requirements of the law, and drivers shall, as far as reasonably practical, supervise boarding passengers and check that they are not obviously carrying alcohol. Drivers will not be expected to carry out baggage or body searches, nor will they be expected to confiscate alcohol or to remove passengers without police assistance.

Operators are asked to comply with these guidelines on a voluntary basis. However, if the police inform the traffic commissioner of any failure on an operator's part to comply with them, the commissioner will consider applying them as a formal condition to that operator's licence under the authority of Section 16(3) of the Public Passenger Vehicles

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CCH AVIATION LOGISTICS

CCH Aviation Logistics of West Drayton in Middlesex moves long-haul crews between Heathrow and other airports to local and London hotels and so demands the highest level of comfort in its vehicles.

This new Optare Solera is the latest addition to the fleet and fits the bill nicely.

On top of the luxurious finish that is standard in the Solera, this 39-seater features padded headrolls on the Fainsa Gaudi recliners, a walnut-effect dashboard and air conditioning. The vehicle is finished in a distinctive metallic silver livery.

Airlines set demanding requirements for the transportation of their crews. As they may be arriving from or departing on a long flight, they must be conveyed in a relaxed and comfortable environment. The operator's previous Solera proved very fit for the purpose.

CCH proprietor, Adrian Colley, said: "We find Solera is well-suited to crew movements in and out of central London. Its relatively compact size enables our drivers to cope easily with congested streets and restricted access to hotels.

"It can carry up to 39 in a high level of comfort. We don't often need that capacity, but it means crews can stretch out and relax. The Soleras are also used for private flights and VIP transfers at Heathrow."

The Solera's six cubic metre boot and its low loading height are a bonus.

The Solera is based on the Atego chassis from Mercedes-Benz. The vehicle is 9.95 metres long and 2.5 metres wide. The Mercedes six-cylinder engine produces 231bhp and is matched to a six-speed gearbox. Air suspension fitted to the rear axle and ABS come as standard.

Operator rating: 9/10 "Parts back-up is a bit of a pain, but other than that it's fine."

FACT FILE

Chassis/body Mercedes-Benz Atego/Optare Solera
Engine Mercedes-Benz 6.4-l six-cylinder (231bhp)
Transmission Six-speed manual
Seats 39
Spec Luxury recliners
Supplied Optare 0113 2645182

CROPLEY COACHES

A year after purchasing its first new Volvo, Lincolnshire-based Cropley Coaches has just taken delivery of two more to accommodate its growing private hire and excursion business.

The Sunsundegui-bodied B7R is very similar to its last purchase, featuring a D7C 275 engine coupled to a ZF six-speed automatic gearbox, full climate control and DVD player. The new coach, however, is also fitted with a wheelchair lift, the first factory-fitted lift to be supplied by Sunsundegui in the UK, and a digital tachograph – a first among Lincolnshire coach operators.

At the same time, Cropley also opted for a Sunsundegui-bodied B12B featuring a 420bhp engine and I-Shift gearbox – another first for the company. The 49-seater also features climate control, toilet, TV/DVD and hot and cold drinks facilities, making it ideal for touring work.

MD, John Cropley, explained: "We knew what to expect with the B7R because we already have one and have been very pleased with its performance. The fact that we can now accommodate 45 seated passengers and two wheelchair users is a definite plus and the digitach has also been well received by our drivers.

"We were attracted to the B12B by the I-Shift gearbox and it has certainly lived up to expectations. Our drivers have commented that it is a truly relaxing motor to drive and even those who were in favour of manual gearboxes are now converted.

"The combination of happy drivers and coaches that are never off the road is a good one and proves that our decision to go with Volvo again was definitely the right one."

Both new coaches are being used for private hire work around the UK as well as European tours including visits to Spain, Poland and other eastern European countries.

Operator rating: 8/10 "Other than a couple of teething problems on the B12, they have both been good so far."

FACT FILE

Chassis/body Volvo B7R/ Sunsundegui Sideral
Engine Volvo D7C 275
Transmission ZF six speed auto
Seats 45
Spec Wheelchair lift, digital tacho

Chassis/body Volvo B12B/ Sunsundegui Sideral 2000
Engine Volvo 420bhp
Transmission Volvo I-shift
Seats 49
Spec Toilet, TV/DVD
Supplied Volvo Bus 01926 401777

SKILLS HOLIDAY

New for the Skills Holidays fleet for 2006 are five Setra S416 GT HD Comfort Class coaches. With 49 seats to provide extra legroom in vehicles that are 13.02m long, this follows the established practice by Skills of offering added comfort in its Premier Class holidays – the company's existing 12m Setras have just 45 seats, instead of the customary 49.

"We took two Setras on trial in 1996 to see how they performed and how our customers and drivers reacted," says managing director, Nigel Skill. "We were very impressed and since then have standardised on Setras."

The new coaches, like a previous batch of seven S315s in 2004, have ZF AS-Tronic transmissions, which have proved to be economical in service, popular with drivers, and give customers a smooth ride with imperceptible gear changes.

The Setras are being used on Skills' holiday programme, mainly in Europe.

The engineer, Steve Robinson, is delighted that the vehicles haven't given him any problems so far.

He said: "We have been running them for about eight weeks and they haven't stopped so far. It's in with

MARSHALLS

A 42-seat Optare Tempo has been acquired by Nottinghamshire operator Marshalls of Sutton-on-Trent to increase capacity on its popular Newark to Tuxford route. With standees, the Tempo can carry almost 70 passengers and was felt to be the right size of vehicle

Owner John Marshall says that it was their experience with a Solo bought four years ago that led them to take a Tempo on demonstration. "We liked its modern appearance and high standard of finish," he says. "The Solo is reliable and easy to work on, so it seemed a natural progression to go for another Optare product when we needed more capacity.

"As we're operating on narrow country roads, our drivers at first found the 12-metre length a little daunting. Now they're used to it and appreciate the comfortable driving position, the good view both to front and rear, and the fact that at 240 horsepower it's got plenty of power to help make it easier to maintain timekeeping."

The new Tempo is fitted with 42 Esteban Civic V0 seats of which six are tip-ups in the wheelchair bay. Air suspension, low interior noise levels and a bright interior with tinted side windows create a pleasant travelling environment. Hanover LED destination equipment is fitted.

Marshalls has opted for the 240bhp Mercedes-Benz OM906La six-cylinder engine, matched to an Allison T310R five-speed automatic transmission.

Established in 1989, Marshalls of Sutton has a 20-strong fleet of buses and coaches

Operator rating: 8/10 "We had one silly little problem with the cooler on the compressor, but other than that it's no trouble at all."

FACT FILE

Chassis/body Optare Tempo (integral)
Engine Mercedes-Benz OM906LA
Transmission Five-speed auto
Seats 42
Spec LED equipment
Supplied Optare 0113 2645182

them Friday night and they're straight out again Saturday morning, which is what you want."

The S416 GT-HD, like all Setras sold in the UK, is powered by a 422bhp 12-litre Mercedes OM457LA engine.

Nottingham-based Skills has been running coaches since 1919. The company's new Setras were supplied by EvoBus UK.

Operator rating: 10/10 "Compared to some chassis, with which we had problem after problem, they're superb."

FACT FILE

Chassis/body Setra S416 Comfort Class
Engine Mercedes-Benz OM457LA 422bhp
Transmission ZF AS-Tronic
Seats 49
Spec Extra legroom
Supplied EvoBus UK 0247 6626000

PC COACHES

PC Coaches of Lincoln has just taken delivery of its first new Wrightbus Solar, which will be used seven days a week on local scheduled services.

The new vehicle, built on a Scania L94UB chassis, is 12 metres long and fitted with 43 Rowan Telmac Telford 20 seats, with capacity for a further 33 standees. The super low floor vehicle also features a reversing camera and CCTV.

It is currently in use five days a week on the scheduled service from Lincoln to Nettleham and switches to the Horncastle to Lincoln route at weekends.

Although it is the first time PC Coaches has opted for a Wrightbus bodied Scania, the combination is not a new one for workshop manager, Duncan Longmate. "I've had experience of the products from my time at Lincolnshire Roadcar and know that the combination works," he says. "Because we required a vehicle to be in operation seven days a week on scheduled services we needed reliability, coupled with a design that provided easy access and passenger comfort.

"We were confident this vehicle would fit the bill and, although it's early days, it looks like we have been proved right."

Operator rating: 9/10 "It's been spot-on. It's going in for its third service this week and I don't expect to find any problems."

FACT FILE

Chassis/body Wrightbus Solar/Scania L94UB
Engine Scania L94
Transmission ZF auto
Seats 43
Spec Reversing camera, CCTV
Supplied Wrightbus 028 25641212

REDWING COACHES

London's leading private hire coach operator has just taken delivery of four new Volvo coaches. Redwing Coaches, which boasts the largest and most up-to-date fleet of touring coaches in the city, has purchased two Volvo B12Ms and two B12Bs.

All four vehicles are identical in specification, featuring Volvo's 420bhp engine, coupled to the I-Shift gearbox. Berkhof-bodied, they are all configured as 53-seaters with full climate control, TV, DVD and CD players and will be used for private hire in and around London by Redwing's associate company, TWH Coaches.

The order was the first that Redwing had placed with Volvo for some time. Managing director, Paul Campana explains: "There was no particular reason we had not bought Volvo for a while - I just buy what I believe is the most appropriate vehicle at any time.

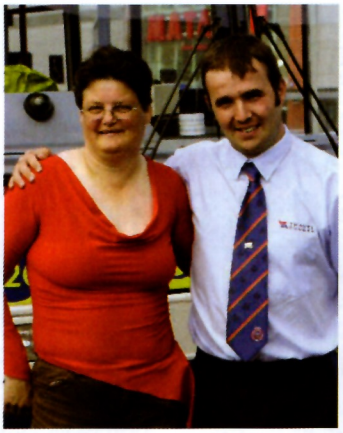
"We're in the process of upgrading the fleet and felt that the four Volvo vehicles would be ideal for our purposes. It's early days but we've not been disappointed. They're already all out on the road earning money and so far we're very pleased with their performance."

Operator rating: 9/10 "They've slotted in well and we haven't had any problems so far."

FACT FILE

Chassis/body Volvo B12M+B12B/Berkhof Axial 50
Engine Volvo Dh12D 420bhp
Transmission Volvo I-shift
Seats 53
Spec Climate control, CD/TV/DVD
Supplied Volvo Bus 01926 401777

Fire hero Alan



Alan with a grateful Wilma, who he helped to escape from the fire

Travel Dundee driver Alan Fordyce has been praised by a mother and her 14-year-old son for his bravery in helping them escape a fire in their home.

Alan, 35, was on his way to work when he noticed thick, black smoke billowing from a property in the Broughty Ferry Road area of Dundee in the early hours of June 26.

He said: "It was pure chance I was passing because I was on overtime that day. I usually turn right at the bottom of Robertson Street, but I knew I had to go the other way and see where the smoke was coming from.

"The smoke was really thick and I knew I had to get the people out, so I just went for it!"

Wilma Mitchell and her son Scott were asleep inside when Alan arrived at about 5am.

She said: "I thought the door was going to fall in when he woke us up, he was battering it so hard. When I opened the door he told me to get out and asked if there was anybody else in the house. My son Scott was there and so we got him out safely as well."

Alan met up with a very grateful Wilma in the city last week.

Alan said: "It was really good to meet Mrs Mitchell and the good thing is that nobody was hurt, that's what makes me feel happy.

"I just did what I thought was right."

New boss in north-west

Peter Walch, 41, has been promoted to area operations manager north-west for First bus operations in Chester and Wirral.

He will be responsible for all day-to-day operations at depots in Birkenhead, Chester and Wrexham.

Peter is a resident of Bury in Lancashire, where he was operations manager for First's depot as part of its Greater Manchester organisation. In his former role he was responsible for delivery of key services including the first route to be operated by articulated buses.

Peter said: "I'm looking forward to the challenges of the job and working with my new colleagues and external partners."

Paul De Santis, commercial director of First's services in Chester and Wirral, said: "Peter's appointment demonstrates our commitment to the highest levels of service delivery and customer satisfaction. We are continuing to reinforce the management team with customer-focussed, experienced transport professionals who can make a real difference."

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Please state contract reference CCO329 on all correspondence.

Tenders are to be submitted by 12 noon on: Wednesday 30 August 2006

JOHN ATKINSON, Head of Legal Services, County Hall, Cauldwell Street, Bedford MK42 9AP

This information was despatched to OJEU on: 5 July 2006 and can be found at http://ted.publications.eu.int/official/

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1991 H REG DENNIS DOMINATOR
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1989 F REG LEYLAND OLYMPIANS
Cummins L10/ZF, Northern Counties semi low

1990 G REG LEYLAND OLYMPIANS,
Gardner 6LXB/ZF automatic,
Alexander 76 seat bodies.

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1994 L REG DENNIS LANCES
Cummins/ZF, East Lancs bodies,
48 seaters, superb condition.

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Cummins L10/ZF, Alexander R type bodies, either 74 seat dual door or 78 single door, large choice

1997 P REG MCW METRORIDER
25 seaters, large selection

1995 M REG VOLVO B6'S,
Volvo engines, ZF gearboxes, Alexander 40-seat bodies, good selection

1991 H REG VOLVO D10M
Volvo engine, ZF gearbox,
East Lancs 79 seat body.

1989 PP DENNIS CONDORS
Gardner/Voith, Duple Metsec bodies,
2 door, 106 seaters

1989 G REG OPTARE DELTA'S
DAF SB220's, ZF automatics, 49 seaters.

1997 P REG VOLVO OLYMPIANS,
Alexander bodies, 2 doors, 68 seats, or can be single doored and upseated to 78

1995 M REG VOLVO OLYMPIAN,
Volvo/Voith, Alexander body, 82 seats , new test.

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Who gets what, and from where page 28
CCTV
Drivers warm to Black Box technology page 40
Last Stop
Bus shelter goes on ebay! page 55
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Office Diary

A Publisher's week...

Monday: Late. Driving to Peterborough from London each day is killing me. When's the Black Cat roundabout going to be fixed? Still it's good for coach and bus spotting. Shiny new 06-plate WA Shearings today; plus the usual NatEx's, TransLincs and a ropey old M-reg Huntingdon bus this morning. This is addictive! Usual mayhem of press day. Final page to the printer at 12.30am. Not bad.

Tuesday: Early start to get to the CPT for 9.00am, but 20 minutes late thanks to delays in the 134 service from Muswell Hill to Tottenham Court Road. Still beats the Northern Line. Good chat with Simon Posner at CPT, but sticky moment when introduced to the membership secretary, who told me we hadn't paid our subs yet. Oh dear! Then GNER to Peterborough in 45 minutes. Amazing.

Wednesday: Late. Mobile speed cameras everywhere. Excited call from a photographer mate who's just taken the pics for next week's profile of transport select committee chairman Gwyneth Dunwoody. He usually shoots soap stars and TV people. Very impressed by Ms Dunwoody. Not an "um" or an "aaah" in an hour's interview; probably slightly different from snapping Jordan and Peter Andre.

Thursday: Late. Why do people want to work in Hatfield anyway, blocking the A1? The issue's taking shape. Our World Cup article turns up; thought the journalist was lost on an alcohol binge in Berlin. He's apologetic that he hasn't got a player quote, but he's saved the piece with an interview with the coach's German driver. Home beckons. The A1 again. Pass an unidentified new sleek silver coach. Wonder about speeding ahead and stopping to take a picture. Last time I did it a couple of passing likely lads in a white van thought I was operating a speed camera and screamed obscenities.

Friday: Late. Pass a Golden Boy. Full office. Copy and pictures pouring in. Pages taking shape. Operator Sue Reynolds emails - she must be back from holiday - we're involved in organising a conference with her so we need to meet. But when? Agree another meeting for 9.00am on Tuesday in London. Victoria... now which bus route is that?

Googled...

www.sunglasses-shop.co.uk

OK, so Googling a sunglasses store isn't rocket science, but given the usual styling of the cheap eyewear currently being sported by the nation's coach and bus drivers, the industry is in need of an image makeover. If you must have Aviators, treat yourself to some REAL Ray-Ban Aviators, or if you're always losing your 'sunnies' get three pairs of imitation Oakleys here for the same price. Top tip; go for polarising lenses if you really want to see clearly: North Beach Fin, £19.99.

What is this? Searching the files this week, a tiny print fell to the floor: it was this unusual vehicle. But what is it?

Evidently named the Vista, owing to its huge and deep windows, its identity remains a mystery. As technical editor Martin Cole said, it is actually not a bad concept, if a little 'cuddly' in proportion. If you know what it is, please share it with us. Answers to *mark.williams@rouncymedia.co.uk* please

Pensnett's price is right!

A group of 28 staff and their partners from Travel West Midlands' Pensnett garage recently travelled north to Manchester where they hoped to get the chance to be contestants in that popular TV show, The Price is Right.

Led by TWM's Black Country sports and social secretary, Paul Bishop, the group enjoyed hours of fun and laughter in the audience during the show, hosted by Joe Pasquale.

Lucky bus driver Steve Bradbury was picked to "come on down" and try his luck at winning some prizes.

Steve, 49, who has been a bus driver for five years, made it through to the tough 'Safe Cracker' round, where he narrowly failed to win the prize of a weekend in Paris. Steve also had the chance to spin the famous wheel, but was beaten by a fellow contestant. Steve did however come away with a very bizarre prize - a 3ft gremlin made out of used motorbike parts!

Steve said: "I was really shocked to be chosen but the adrenaline kicked in as soon I walked down those famous steps. Joe Pasquale was great and really put me at ease. It was a bit of a blow not to win another prize, but it was a fantastic experience."

Steve (front) holding his beloved gremlin with Pensnett's assistant traffic manager, Kerry Jukes, and Paul Bishop, general secretary for the sports & social club

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July 2006

EXCEL'S IVECO

Iveco Daily conversion solves operator's luggage problems

pages 16-18

Euro 4 could hit vehicle builders hard

While the rapid move towards Euro 4 emissions levels has seen an unprecedented number of vehicle launches and model changes in a short space of time, it is going to make things difficult for a number of vehicle builders - whether they specialise in conversion or coachbuilding.

New platforms with redesigned fronts and restyled bodies require a lot of changes to existing build designs. Moulds have to be replaced, new window glass may need sourcing and altered axle weights are likely to prompt complete rethinking on the layouts and capacities possible.

Faced with so many new models to cater for in such a short space of time, it will mean many of the builders are facing huge financial outlay in tooling up and, in some cases, could lead to them specialising in particular makes and models rather than try to offer a broad spectrum of products.

This month we welcome aboard Keith Halstead, director of the Community Transport Association. Mr Halstead has a clear vision of how he wants to see CTA operations developing and I've long advocated there should be more dialogue between CTA and commercial operators where hopefully they would discover areas of common ground, work in partnership and benefit themselves as well as the community in general. I firmly believe this regular contribution in *Minibus*, from the CTA, will help commercial operators understand some of the problems the voluntary sector faces and the high degree of competence contained within the organisation.

Martin Cole, Editor

2 News All the latest news

5 Deliveries Your latest fleet additions

6 Sprinter Safety technology unveiled

10 VW Caravelle Road test on the class act

15 CTA What community transport is all about

16 Excel Iveco Daily Put through its paces

20 TransLinc Training services explained

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Excel joins eight-seat market

Excel conversions of Doncaster is joining the eight-seat MPV market for the first time with a limousine version of a Mercedes Vito 111.

Director Peter Vernon said: "We've had several enquiries for this type of vehicle and noticed there is growing trend in small-party travel, particularly the use of limousines, so we've put together a package suitable for executive-style hires.

"We've got a demonstrator with seven two-tone leather Politecnica seats, fridge, LCD screen and CD/DVD player utilising infra-red headphone sets, inset blue lighting in the roof and an attractive trim finish. We add a body styling kit and marker lights too."

While some converters have claimed they are finding it difficult to obtain base vehicles in the run-up to new model releases, Excel says it is finding little problem.

The move to new Euro 4 vehicles is underway, though, and the company has received a new-style Sprinter body shell from which to begin designing and manufacturing saloon extensions for the new generation of minicoaches with a coach-style rear end.

Work is also underway on developing a proprietary built-in floor with Unwin Safety Systems.

Excel is also converting batches of vehicles for Holloway Commercials and currently starting work on a bath of 24 Iveco Daily minicoaches.

The company is also preparing to start conversion work on the last batch of 35 LDV Convoy MAX minicoaches, which are also marketed by Holloway.

New Transit on sale

Transit Specialist Dealers across the country are springing the new Euro 4 model onto the market this month with a host of special offers. Among the most attractive are: three years' free servicing and free Bluetooth connection; and 0% and low rate finance offers.

Prices start from £13,150 plus VAT and delivery, and basic packages offer standard features such as: CD/radio, ABS with disc brakes all round, front mud flaps, high-output alternator, upgraded starter motor and upgraded security systems.

Great deals on new Euro 4 Transit

Transit also has new distinctive front-end styling, improved driving dynamics, dashboard-mounted gear lever and better steering, brakes and suspension. Additionally, it boasts the first self-charging ignition key.

Customers can choose from seven new engines, six diesel and one petrol, offering improved power and economy with quieter operation. Its launch is being accompanied by radio and TV campaigns and a new microsite for Transit has gone live on *www.fordvans.co.uk*.

Spirit triaxle will be relaunched at this year's Community Transport Event

New look for T-VAC triaxle

Leyland-based T-VAC, the chassis and suspension specialist, fire appliance manufacturer and builder of the Spirit triaxle minibus, is to relaunch the Spirit at this year's Community Transport Event.

The Spirit will retain the existing lowfloor triaxle chassis, but it will be mated to the updated Euro 4 version of the Fiat Ducato Max. A new type of composite body construction is under development in Holland with the suppliers of the various composite mouldings for T-VAC's fire appliances.

The company's original indication that it would move Spirit production to Stoke and integrate it with the former Driveline vehicle conversion business has been reversed. T-VAC is planning to expand on its Leyland site and has transferred all the Driveline operation there, along with key staff. The Stoke facility is now closed.

Sprinter plant opens in Germany

The first new Mercedes-Benz Sprinter rolled off the line at the new €300m production plant in Lugwigsfelde, south of Berlin, creating 500 new jobs in the process.

Brandenburg's regional premier, Matthias Platzeck, expressed his approval of what he called DaimlerChrysler's "exemplary corporate policy".

He said the group had used qualification programmes to give jobless people the opportunity to enter regular employment.

Adding that the high number of trainees demonstrated its tremendous commitment to the Eastern states of Germany and a significant contribution towards creating opportunities for young people.

The new Sprinter is now produced at two German plants, at Dusseldorf and Ludwigsfelde. A completely new manufacturing line containing state-of-the-art automated production equipment was constructed at Ludwigsfelde, where flatbed vans and chassis are built.

The Ludwigsfelde expansion also included new paint and body shops. It is already operating a two-shift working pattern and is gearing up to introduce a third shift.

Following DaimlerChrysler's €1.8 billion investment in the development of the new model, top priority is being placed on exemplary workmanship and long-term production quality.

A greater proportion of sheet metal components are now galvanised, compared to the previous model.

Meticulously seamed seals, application of stone chip primer and underseal in vulnerable areas all help to ensure long life and value retention. In addition, Ludwigsfelde benefits from employing a new corrosion protection process called RoDip (rotation dipping). In each pre-treatment bath, including the catephoretic dip bath, the vehicle bodies are rotated a full 360 degrees on their transverse axes, ensuring uniform all-over coating of all sheet metal parts and cavities.

Ratcliff Palfinger extends warranty

Ratcliff Palfinger has become the first UK tail lift manufacturer to extend the warranty on its underfloor range of passenger lifts to two years.

The RUL range is acknowledged to be one of the most user-friendly lifts on the market, with models suitable for most minibuses and coachbuilt bodies.

Introduced to the market place two years ago, the RUL350A has an extra large platform and lifting capacity of 350kg, designed to accommodate today's larger and heavier wheelchairs.

"We endeavour to give the best possible service to all our users and we believe that doubling the length of the warranty period previously given will greatly benefit both our regular and new customers," explains Eddie McIver, sales director. "This new policy came into effect on July 1 and will apply to all new orders received on or after this date."

Two-year warranty for Palfinger lifts

Slim Board LED

The latest product to join the Kara & Jalmarit range is KJ-J-555LED Slim Board – a ceiling lamp suitable for all types of passenger transport vehicles.

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Deliveries

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HENSHAWS COACHES

Henshaws Coaches of Moreton in the Marsh, set up two years ago by Daniel Henshaw and Peter Drew, has invested in its first new coach, a Plaxton Cheetah.

The company has grown steadily and now runs six vehicles, most of which have Plaxton bodies.

"Our business has now reached the point where I can justify the investment in a new vehicle," Daniel Henshaw explains, "and I decided to start with a Cheetah. It offers high standards of comfort for small groups. The Mercedes Vario chassis is an attraction too, with proven reliability and good aftersales service."

FACT FILE

Chassis/body Mercedes-Benz Vario O814D Plaxton
Engine OM 904 LA 150bhp
Transmission Six-speed manual
Seats 33
Supplied by Plaxton 01909 551166

BESSWAY TRAVEL

With 22 seats the Optare Soroco Plus minicoach that entered service earlier this year with Bessway Travel of Perivale is proving to be the ideal size.

Mike Heffernan, who runs the 12-vehicle minibus and coach fleet with his partner Susan, says a vehicle of this capacity is perfect for small groups travelling to the south coast and for private hires and school outings.

"It's a lovely vehicle built to a high standard and is popular with passengers," he says. "This is a proper coachbuilt vehicle that looks stylish and creates a good impression with our customers. It also plugs a gap between our 16-seat minibuses and our larger 29-seater coaches.

"Internally the Soroco is extremely well appointed and has a luxurious feel that passengers appreciate. With Webasco heating for the winter and air conditioning for the summer, you can maintain a pleasant travelling environment."

Based on the extended Sprinter chassis from Mercedes-Benz, the Soroco Plus is fitted with Fainsa high-back coach seats with grab handles, aisle armrests and three-point inertia reel seat belts. An overhead luggage rack provides for hand baggage, while the dropwell luggage boot has a capacity of two cubic metres - just right for the smaller amount of luggage that weekend parties carry.

FACT FILE

Chassis/body Mercedes-Benz 0616 Ferqui Soroco
Engine Mercedes-Benz OM612
Transmission Five-speed synchromesh
Seats 22
Spec Air conditioning
Supplied by Optare Coach sales 01709 535100

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Q'STRAINT

MERCEDES-BENZ SPRINTER

Sprinter goes high-tech

Now bristling with automatic safety devices, the Mercedes-Benz Sprinter will assert itself at the very top of the minibus market. *Minibus* editor Martin Cole investigates...

After an investment of around €1.8 billion and the adoption of class-leading safety technology, new Sprinter has thrown down a serious challenge to its competitors and is sure to win itself a larger share of the overall light commercial market.

Mercedes-Benz UK has made a huge commitment to supporting the Sprinter range and is aiming at maximised up-time to ensure the economic viability to the wide range of businesses that rely on Sprinter products for their livelihoods.

Marketing manager for Mercedes vans, David Higson, said: "The Sprinter story is one of continual evolution and development. There have been 1.3 million sold worldwide since it was launched in 1995 and in that time it has won many major awards - not least the acclaimed 'Van of the Year' title from *Motor Transport* - two years in a row.

"New Sprinter brings a lot of attractive features. It is cheaper to run, it has new power options, it's better equipped, it retains a high residual value and it offers a huge range of options through its versatility and adaptability. The largest panel van can accommodate up to 17 cubic metres.

"We have chassis up to five tonnes and all have passive and active safety systems including the latest Load Adaptive ESP stability systems.

"There is an enhanced passenger safety cell at the front, designed for greater occupant protection in head-on collisions and it is preceded by a very effective crumple zone designed to absorb a considerable amount of impact.

"Larger mirrors offer the driver a better view and they come with integrated indicators that make the vehicle more conspicuous when signalling. These are modular and both easier and cheaper to replace or repair. Also, we've made the vehicle much more comfortable for the driver. There is more room, plenty of adjustment on the steering column and seat, useful storage areas and a high level of trim.

"It is often said a comfortable driver is a better driver and along with our ease of repair, on-board active and passive systems and vehicle security, it is good to see insurance companies reacting positively and dropping the new Sprinter down in the insurance group ratings.

"Customers now get 24-30,000-mile service intervals, full 24-hour, 365-day back-up cover and the warranty is valid for the entire three-year period - even if the vehicle is being double-manned. What is also going to be attractive is the residual value. CAP predicts these will rise by £800. Sprinters already command a higher residual than other makes, currently £1,700 above its nearest rival, so the customer stands to get a good deal on whole-life costs."

Demand for new Sprinters is running ahead of availability as the initial launch stocks have dwindled quickly and the main supplies won't come on stream until September. Some models in the range won't be available until the end of the year - or maybe until early 2007.

Mr Higson also noted it was encouraging that customers were now ordering a higher proportion of automatic gearboxes as the new five-speed unit is available across the range for the first time. It supersedes the SprintShift gearbox which was an automated manual transmission with clutchless automatic or sequential manual change options. SprintShift has been discontinued because it cost around £1,600 as an optional extra, but the new automatic gearbox adds only £1,000 to the base cost because it is mass produced and already proven in the E-class saloon cars.

Operators looking at the 5.0t Sprinter will find they have the option

Above: Sprinter offers enhanced safety for passengers. Left: Driver comfort is second to none

of SuperSingle tyres in place of twin rear wheels. The SuperSingle option will allow more internal room in the passenger saloon but as the single tyres don't have the same carrying capacity as the twin rear layout, the GVW is reduced to 4.6t.

The previous six-tonne model is no longer in production and because it relied heavily on a unique driveline it wasn't considered to be a part of the Sprinter family. As such, the small numbers involved made it too expensive to produce and it wasn't cost effective enough to be taken to Euro 4.

Driving tests

Perhaps the most dramatic demonstration of on-board safety came from the USC - understeer control.

This works in conjunction with the load-adaptive ESP and ensures a stable reaction to emergency directional changes where a normal vehicle could well end up in a dangerous skid or potentially roll over.

The course was laid out to resemble a normal driving scenario where the vehicle was moving at 45-50mph and suddenly encountered a need to swerve - such as a vehicle pulling out into traffic or a child stepping out from between parked cars. The drivers demonstrated the manoeuvre by swerving rapidly into the adjacent lane and immediately back again - without touching the brakes.

The result was the USC sensing the violent turn and comparing it to the vehicle's speed, applying braking force to the wheels which would scrub speed and not destabilise the vehicle. The programme determines which wheels to apply the braking force to and allows it to be steered around the obstacle in relative safety.

Mercedes-Benz points out that the

system, despite being a major aid to road safety, is not infallible at higher speeds as the dynamics and general laws of physics determine that trying to complete such a manoeuvre at speed can cause an immediate roll - and brakes won't work at all when the wheels are in the air.

Further tests in the same vein were carried out by two Sprinters with completely different load characteristics.

One had its load towards the front of the vehicle and the other right at the back. In the cab they carried 'head up display' units set to indicate the amount of brake pressure the system was applying to each hydraulic line.

Each of the Sprinters went through the same swerving manoeuvre and it was immediately clear how the Adaptive ESP system sensed the specific requirements in each case and varied the braking force to deliver the best results.

Hill Hold

The Hill Hold (AAS) function is now becoming a popular addition across a range of manufacturers and it simplifies starting off on an incline. The system waits two seconds after the handbrake is released before relaxing the brake pressure. This gives the driver time to remove the right foot from the brake pedal, apply a few revs and begin to find the bite-point of the clutch, safe in the knowledge that the vehicle will not roll backwards the moment the brake pedal is released.

Although it isn't a particularly necessary function for competent drivers, it could prove to have benefits such as extended clutch life and lower fuel consumption, where vehicles are regularly subjected to different drivers. It would likely be welcomed by those driving in steep terrain for much of their day, too.

MSS

Motor Stop Start is a another optional extra very few customers have ever taken up, yet it offers the potential for considerable cost saving.

MSS costs just under £200 to have as a factory-supplied extra. Retrofit would be much more expensive and is not advised. For the £200 investment, according to CAP assessment, you will get £500 added to the residual value of the vehicle. So it would seem to be a 'no-brainer' for a start.

Although results achieved with MSS vary greatly depending on the type of

Top: USC test shows the automatically braked wheel to stabilise the Sprinter. Left: Neat overhead panel. Above: David Higson, marketing manager, Mercedes vans

driving environment, there are some considerable savings to be made in terms of fuel consumption. The system functions when the handbrake is applied and the vehicle taken out of gear. The engine is switched off automatically after two or three seconds and so the idling time is cut dramatically. When the driver needs to move off, depressing the clutch pedal immediately restarts the engine, the appropriate gear is selected, handbrake off, and away.

Under exhaustive testing in dense, rush-hour traffic and congestion, MSS has been found to cut consumption by over 20%. There appears to be no real detriment to the starter, starter pinion, ring gear or battery life.

Using MSS in traffic is slightly disconcerting for a start, but drivers quickly become used to it and begin to appreciate how quiet it is in the cab when the engine is off. Should drivers need to keep the engine running to keep screens demisted or heating levels at an appropriate level, the system can simply be switched off.

Skidpan

Skidpan tests used to be fun. They were the place where you could safely experience getting out of shape on a slippery surface and feel how a vehicle reacts in such circumstances to applications of opposite lock, braking and power.

Try getting a new Sprinter to do things like that and you will be disappointed - it isn't going to happen. Such is the control exerted over the drivetrain and braking system by the ESP and all the associated electronic functions, few drivers will fall foul of slippery wet conditions and keep the vehicle and occupants, not to mention other road users, much safer.

The system uses a combination of individual wheel braking and power reduction to limit loss of traction. Trying to hold a fairly tight turn, such as a single or dual carriageway trunk road roundabout, is made possible even on a very low friction surface. Even if the driver holds the accelerator pedal to the floor, the vehicle will not allow itself to travel any faster than it can safely negotiate the turn.

Turning off the ESP function and relying on the ABS and ASR functions allows more leeway for the vehicle to get out of line, but not uncontrollably, and it shows how effective the new systems are in assisting control and allowing the driver to steer it effectively under

some extremely adverse conditions.

Road runs

The UK launch of the new Euro 4 Sprinter in May was followed last month by a 'Van Experience'. The event took place over two weeks - where dealers and key customers were invited to attend familiarisation days at the Prodrive test track facility at Fen End, near Kenilworth.

During the launch period, DaimlerChrysler entertained over 800 people, putting on a varied programme of driving events to highlight the enhancements made to the new range.

A brief eight-mile route from Fen End to Balsall Common and back again was sufficient for most people to get a feel for the performance of the new Sprinter and the updated Vito.

The Sprinter can seriously impress anyone not having driven one of the new models. The driver comfort, low noise level, smooth power delivery and vastly improved brakes are sufficient on their own and set the vehicle in the forefront of its class. Brakes on the previous model were highly effective but always had a 'spongey' feel at the pedal. The new model is now on 16-inch wheels and this allows larger brake discs to be fitted and in combination with ventilated discs and twin-piston callipers they now feel much more business-like and offer vastly better feedback.

One of the obvious attractions in the range is the 3.0-litre V6 engine, which develops 184bhp and a massive 400Nm torque. A left-hand-drive version was available for test drives, but the same engine was also installed in a Vito and I tried that one to see how it compared to the 200bhp Vito 123 with the V6 petrol engine that I tried at last year's event.

Staff at Mercedes-Benz claimed its massive torque meant it was faster accelerating than the petrol version, despite its horsepower disadvantage. If you can control the wheelspin, that's probably true, but the acceleration can be vicious if the accelerator is pressed a little too hard and it is very difficult to pull away without squealing the tyres. Once under way, the engine pulls like a train and the Vito would offer serious competition to boy racers in their 'hot hatches.'

Hardly suitable for minibus or coach application, the 184bhp monster has been primarily developed to meet the requirements of the emergency services - particularly frontline ambulance or police emergency response teams, where the level of on-board specialist equipment means they are running very close to the absolute GVW of the vehicle and could do with extra power to cut through traffic under 'blue light' conditions.

Owner drivers might consider one of these or perhaps small party golf tour operators where a trailer is used to carry the luggage and equipment - they are not ideally suited to carrying passengers if their drivers are likely to abuse the power.

Verdict

With so much invested in the development of the new Sprinter it is fairly safe to say it sets new benchmarks for the industry. Available from the first quarter of next year as a 17-seat, factory-built vehicle at much the same cost as the previous model, it stacks up straight away. Add considerably higher levels of comfort, safety and economy, plus lower whole-life costs and strong residual value, and the Sprinter has to be seriously considered as a viable and cost-effective proposition.

Beyond 17 seats, Sprinter will be an EvoBus product.

Left: On-board systems offer amazing control on low-friction surfaces

VOLKSWAGEN CARAVELLE TDi 130

Smooth operator

Demanding clientele expect a touch of class. The Volkswagen Caravelle provides it. But is it a minibus or an MPV? And is it worth the extra money compared to its rivals. Read the facts and then decide...

By Steve Walker

The conventional minibus is great for getting small groups of people from A to B, but operators faced with more demanding clientele sometimes need a vehicle that goes further in the comfort stakes. High-flying executives or tourists on expensive holidays expect a little more when travelling to that business meeting or transferring from the airport to their five-star hotels. This is where products like Volkswagen's Caravelle come in, providing multi-person transportation with an extra touch of class.

The Market

Minibus or MPV, that is the question - at least so far as Volkswagen's Caravelle is concerned. Even the Volkswagen marketing men themselves seem slightly unsure as to where this vehicle sits in the marque's extensive product portfolio. On the occasion of the vehicle's launch in 2003, we were told that it formed part of the Volkswagen passenger car range, sitting above the Touran and Sharan MPVs. Today, you'll find the Caravelle listed amongst these and the other famous VW models in the passenger car section of the German marque's website, but it's also included on the commercial vehicle site. The Caravelle's status grows murkier still when you learn that interested parties can buy one from Volkswagen Van Centres as well as from just a few selected passenger car retail outlets.

By virtue of this blurring of the minibus/MPV boundaries, it goes up against a mixed bag of rival products. On the one hand, you have the larger MPVs such as Chrysler's Grand Voyager and the Renault Grand Espace, but on the other you have overtly van-based offerings such as the Mercedes-Benz Vito Traveliner and Volkswagen's own Transporter Shuttle. The product that best matches the Caravelle's blend of comfort and capacity is probably the Mercedes-Benz Viano. It's a well-appointed 'MPV' version of the Vito panel van, but Mercedes won't thank you for referring to it as such, just as Volkswagen likes to gloss over the Caravelle's Transporter panel van origins.

In the end, though, the Caravelle's positioning in the market makes little difference to buyers who tend to be less concerned with pigeonholing the product than with its real world abilities. Taken at face value, the Caravelle has proved popular with families and businesses needing the seven seats and reasonably generous luggage space, but valuing the classy feel of the versatile interior.

The Product

The Caravelle is based on the T5 version of the Transporter panel van and is manufactured jointly at Volkswagen's plants at Hanover in Germany and Poznan in Poland. It's available in SE or Executive trim with six-speed manual or Tiptronic automatic transmissions. Then there's the choice of either front-wheel drive or Volkswagen's 4MOTION 4x4 drive system.

There's a trio of engines for operators to consider. The range-topping 233bhp 3.2-litre V6 petrol powerplant is refined and powerful but has limited appeal in the UK thanks to its 21mpg average fuel economy and the presence of a 173bhp TDi 174 diesel. This muscular oil-burning powerplant

returns 34mpg and impressive performance that's not a million miles away from the V6 in real-world conditions, but the big seller in the Caravelle line-up is the 129bhp TDi 130 diesel. This is the unit that powers the model we test here - it's a 2.5-litre direct injection diesel like the more expensive TDi 174 option and it accounts for around 60% of total Caravelle sales.

Our Caravelle arrived with SE trim, but despite this being the base specification, it's still extremely generous by minibus standards. Remote central locking, heated front seats, a multi-functional table in the rear, 16-inch alloy wheels, a six-CD autochanger and air-conditioning feature among the highlights at this level. Then there's the huge array of optional extras that Caravelle customers can specify to upgrade their vehicles...

List price for a Caravelle SE TDi 130 is a hefty £23,608 (+VAT) but our test vehicle featured options that tagged another £2,500 on to that and anyone wanting the impressive TDi 174 engine needs to find a further £1,400. There's no doubt

Above: VW Caravelle's classic lines exude quality. Below right: Useful luggage space. Below: Car-style dash with fascia-mounted gear change. Below left: More room in the cab area

FACT FILE

Base Vehicle Volkswagen Transporter panel van
Engine 2.5-litre TDi direct injection diesel
Power Output 130bhp @ 3,500rpm
Torque 340Nm @ 2,000rpm
Gearbox Six-speed manual
Top Speed 104mph
Gross Vehicle Weight 3.0T
Seating Driver + six passengers
Fuel Economy 25.2mpg (urban), 40.4mpg (extra urban), 33.2mpg (combined)
Dimensions length/width/heightmm 4890/2242/1949
Standard Safety Features Front, side and curtain airbags, ABS with EBD, ASR, ESP, 3-point seatbelt
Warranty Three-year/100,000-mile inc three-year roadside assistance
Contact Volkswagen UK www.volkswagen-vans.co.uk

VERDICT

Who's it for?
Tour operators, luxury hotels and businesses who regularly carry small groups of clients or employees in high levels of comfort

Any alternatives?
Mercedes-Benz Viano, Chrysler Grand Voyager, Renault Grande Espace, Volkswagen Transporter Shuttle

- ☺ Interior versatility
- ☺ Equipment
- ☺ Engine
- ☺ Passenger comfort
- ☹ Driving dynamics
- ☹ Limited capacity
- ☹ Price

The Bottom Line
The Caravelle cossets its passengers in a way few other minibuses can and is perfect for operators who have to make a certain impression on their passengers. It looks pricey on paper but is competitive alongside the select group of large MPVs and top-end minibuses with which it vies for sales

VOLKSWAGEN CARAVELLE TDi 130

that this is an expensive vehicle, but it's easy to see and feel the extra quality you're getting for your money. Operators will just have to ask themselves whether it's extra quality that they really need.

Safety provision is similarly comprehensive. All Caravelle models feature ABS with EBD brakeforce distribution and EDL (Electronic Differential Lock) to improve traction. There's also ASR traction control, a system that really earns its corn when the more powerful engines are fitted, Volkswagen's ESP stability control and EBC (Engine Braking Control). In terms of passive safety, there are front side and curtain airbags for the driver and front passenger, but rear curtain airbags are a £215 option.

The Practicalities

Drivers used to minibuses based on the larger group of panel vans will find the Caravelle refreshingly compact. The vehicle is 4,890mm long and measures 2,242mm in width but it never feels less than substantial and the 3,000kg gross vehicle weight bears this impression out. The payload capacity in the model we tested is 687kg and the Caravelle will be quite happy towing a braked trailer up to 2,500kg should extra cargo capacity be required.

The highlight of the vehicle has to be the rear passenger compartment, where Volkswagen have employed a system of floor rails to give the seating a level of versatility that's rarely found in minibus products. There's certainly scope for occupants to work or conduct business meetings in the back while travelling.

Behind the driver and front passenger is a second row comprised of two chairs and a central table, these items can slide, swivel and fold into various positions, opening up a variety of potential cabin configurations. Behind is a conventional three-seat bench, but this is also mounted on the rail system and can slide fore or aft to adjust the ratio of legroom in front to luggage space behind.

Passenger accommodation is generally very good with firm, supportive seating and arm rests for most passengers. Legroom and headroom are ample in all the seats, although space is limited when it comes to actually manoeuvring the furniture into the desired position. The movement of the middle chairs is obstructed when the table is in certain positions, while some of the levers and catches can be a little reluctant. Although irritating

Above: Distinctive front and rear profiles. Top left: Table is fitted with two drawers for cutlery items, sugar sachets, milk, etc. Centre left: The table folds away for extra space. Lower left: Seating is comfortable, but headroom limited. Right: Excellent side access with and without the table in place

at first, you do get the hang of manipulating the seats reasonably quickly and it's hard not to be impressed with the overall build quality inside.

Nice touches include ceiling-mounted air conditioning and lighting controls for each row of seats, a wide gangway so you can walk through from the front to the rear and the numerous storage bins provided. There's also plenty of 12v power outlets for charging all the electronic gadgets that modern executives are forced to cart around with them. On the downside, the light fittings mounted low on the doorsills are a little flimsy and can easily be damaged or kicked off on entry.

The Drive

The Caravelle's performance on the tarmac is something of a mixed bag. It rides on the same commercial vehicle suspension as the Transporter panel van, but the Caravelle has been lowered and the ride feels noticeably softer. When cruising, occupants are well insulated from minor imperfections in the road, but the vehicle shudders over larger bumps. Sharp changes of direction induce pronounced body roll and there's significant forward pitching under braking. Motorway driving is a very smooth and relaxing experience in the Caravelle, and that was obviously a key criteria for the designers, but there are rivals that handle noticeably better on twisting B-roads.

The engine is typical of Volkswagen's direct injection units in that it's very strong through the meat of its torque band but there's a touch of lag while the revs build. If you work it hard, the note becomes quite raucous, but generally refinement is quite good - although perhaps not quite on a par with the best common-rail diesel engines found in rival products. Cruising at 30-40mph the main sound in the cabin is tyre roar and the engine really is nicely subdued.

The Caravelle's steering has a reassuring weighty feel, while the gearchange via the dash-mounted shifter for the six-speed manual box is positive if a tad notchy. The driving position is very high, so there's good visibility and, with the optional acoustic parking sensors on our test model, manoeuvring couldn't really have been easier. The dash and the controls are as well made as you would expect from Volkswagen.

The Verdict

Many operators will be deterred by the premium price Volkswagen ask for their Caravelle compared to more run-of-the-mill minibus offerings but even in the entry-level model we tried, you can see where the extra money goes. It's an extremely solid-feeling product with lots of versatility in the saloon area and plenty of thoughtful touches that make it feel that little bit special. The driving experience is tailored towards passenger comfort and the vehicle is a capable long-distance cruiser while equipment and safety provision are both very generous. The styling is unlikely to set many pulses racing, but is neat and inoffensive in the best Volkswagen traditions.

About the CTA

The Community Transport Association is a charity providing leadership, learning and enterprise support to member organisations delivering innovative transport solutions

The Community Transport Association is the UK's largest provider of training, publications, advice, events and project support to all third sector transport providers.

Community transport organisations enjoy additional support and financial benefits from being members of the CTA, which is recognised by government as the voice of voluntary and community transport in the UK.

The CTA aims to strengthen the work of its members in the third sector - encompassing voluntary and community organisations, charities, social enterprises, cooperatives and mutuals - by creating an environment in which they can prosper, develop and provide much-needed help to people throughout society.

Find out more about its work and about the benefits of joining the CTA by visiting the website, *www.ctauk.org*, or by calling the membership team on 08707 743586.

What is the CTA?

There is much more to the CTA and community transport than most people realise, says Brian Shawdale, the CTA's training and advice director.

"The community transport network across the UK delivers access, mobility, choice and independence to thousands of people every day. It develops services in response to need and is based very firmly on the concept of equal opportunity for all," he says.

"Community transport operators are independent bodies controlled by voluntary management boards comprising local people and representatives of the passengers they carry.

"The community transport movement has been around for almost 40 years, attempting to meet the transport needs of individual communities. Everyone involved in community transport knows that it exists to put right the injustice and disadvantage experienced by members of the community.

"Originally, community transport focussed on people with a disability and/or in poverty, but services are now more comprehensive. Door-to-door transport (Dial-a-Ride, Ring & Ride, etc.) is available and generally provided by a community transport group. Many operators now also provide group transport to other community organisations. These organisations are either fighting for social change for their members because they have a disability; helping members of the community to thrive and live together harmoniously as part of religious, educational or health-based organisations; or carrying out their own charitable activities, such as environmental work.

"Community transport operations range from voluntary car schemes in rural areas to major social enterprises running significant bus routes for Transport for London."

The big event

Communities Moving Forward 2006 is for everyone involved in providing passenger transport in the third sector. Every year, the CTA organises the UK's largest annual exhibition of accessible vehicles, products and services.

This year it will take place at G-Mex, Manchester, on October 10-12. Entry is free.

Alongside the exhibition there will be three days of workshops, seminars and training sessions.

On the first day, there will be a high- profile one-day conference entitled *Is public transport a public service?* Issues in the spotlight will include public service delivery by the third sector, social enterprise, accessibility and social inclusion. Several leading figures and policy experts from central, regional and local government and the third sector will be speaking.

Commercial operators are warmly welcome to attend either as visitors to the exhibition or as delegates on the various training and seminar sessions. There are also a few spaces remaining if you wish to exhibit.

■ Full details can be found on *www.ctauk.org*.

Community Transport Association

■ Last week saw the launch of a publication *Moving Greater Manchester Forward*. This four-year, award-winning, project has been hailed as a breakthrough in the strategic planning of community transport at a local level.

The CTA has worked in partnership with the Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Authority and community transport operators to build the capacity of the community transport network to better serve the people of Greater Manchester and tackle some of the causes of social exclusion.

The CTA hopes that other PTAs and regional transport partnerships will embrace this strategic approach.

***Moving Greater Manchester Forward* can be obtained from the CTA's Central Office. For information, email: info@ctauk.org.**

The CTA gave evidence to the Transport Select Committee's enquiry into bus services earlier this month. It particularly highlighted the inequality of concessionary fares, the need for a review of the Section 19/22 legislation and the decline of services in many rural areas following the withdrawal of central government funding.

Public service delivery, accessibility, volunteering, social enterprise...

...join the debate on all these issues and more at

G-Mex in Manchester, 10 – 12 October 2006,

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cta uk **COMMUNITIES MOVING FORWARD**

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- Social programme, including the MiDAS 10th anniversary party
- Learn about CTA's work across the UK at our AGM with guest speaker

How to book

If you would like to receive details of the programme please email **info@ctauk.org** or visit our website at **www.ctauk.org**

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EXCEL CONVERSIONS | IVECO DAILY 40 C12

Above: Iveco Daily offers space and comfort, providing a practical option for TJ's Coaches

Iveco solves TJ's luggage problem

TJ's Coaches has invested in an Iveco conversion to minimise the use of trailers. Martin Cole goes for a drive...

Doncaster-based Excel Conversions is well known for its high specification Sprinters, but the company does a similar build programme on Iveco Daily minibuses too.

Starting at £26,995 for the smaller 40 C12 platform, the range extends to the 50 C13 model with end prices always dependent on customer specification.

The model has always sold steadily as an alternative to the almost ubiquitous Sprinter and VW LT, offering a cheaper but no less practical option with plenty of passenger capacity.

The latest of these to leave the Doncaster converter has just been acquired by TJ's Coaches of Brigg and *Minibus* was invited to give it a quick once-over ahead of its handover.

TJ's is a relative newcomer to the industry having started in 1997 with just one taxi. It was formed by former lorry driver, Nigel Janney, who quickly expanded the business and now it operates a fleet of 17 vehicles and, including part-time drivers, employs around 25-30 people. Five of the vehicles are taxis - two cars and three people carriers, with nine minicoaches of varying capacity from 12 to 33 seats, a 10.0m Javelin, a 12m Javelin and a Bova Futura.

Nigel said flexibility had been the key to success, hence the diversity of his fleet. The business had achieved a good local reputation through operating contracts with local businesses and schools and undertook a lot of shuttle work for Relax Holidays. In addition, TJ's had established its own holiday programme and took in as much private hire as it could manage.

"We get an awful lot of airport work and long runs to the shipping ports with cruise passengers," he said. "For that reason, most of the minibuses are equipped with towbars because we needed the luggage space. However,

Above: Ample luggage space minimises use of trailers.
Right: Generous saloon space adds to passenger comfort.
Below: Walnut-effect vinyl trim enhances the dash area

I'm beginning to feel that isn't the right thing to do. We seem to get a lot of near misses from other motorists who just don't expect a trailer to be behind a minicoach and that's one of the main reasons I've gone for the Iveco this time. It's spacious enough to fit 16 seats in the saloon and still get a large luggage space at the rear. I've had a towbar fitted just in case we need it but I'm hoping we can start to complete a lot more jobs without needing trailers."

Nigel takes a hands-on approach to the business and does a lot of driving himself, leaving the administration to his transport manager, Christine Rands.

"She was my boss in a former life," Nigel explained. "When I drove trucks, Christine was the transport manager and looked after about 30 of us. When I told her I was thinking of going it alone but hadn't a clue about administration, she offered to keep my books for me. She's also the CPC holder, so she's a very valuable member of the team and

Left: Large mirrors. Right: Sliding offside door doubles as emergency exit. Below: Peter Vernon, Excel director, hands over Iveco to Nigel Janney, Christine Janney and Christine Rands

EXCEL CONVERSIONS IVECO DAILY 40 C12

Top left: Tow bar fitted, just in case. Top right: Under-dash locker for more storage space. Middle left: Pleasant passenger environment. Above: Individual passenger sets for ventilation and lighting. Middle right: Demountable drop-down DVD screen. Lower right: Wooden sills add a touch of class

played no small part in our success."

Excel specification

The Daily's specification included a full body kit with ten additional marker lights and retains the standard rear doors to give full access to the large, fully-trimmed, luggage space which is partitioned off from the saloon. The interior is fully trimmed in grey and blue cloth with wooden sills beneath the dark-tinted panoramic windows and pleated blue curtains to match. The 15 Politecnica seats are trimmed in a patterned blue moquette and feature leather headrest inserts. The same moquette is applied as a centre roof strip, on the undersides of the full-length luggage racks and on the face of the under-dash locker. The dashboard fascia panel has also been enhanced by a walnut-effect vinyl trim kit.

Additional features include roof-mounted Webasto air conditioning, which is distributed via integral ducting in the luggage racks to individual passenger sets - also enhanced by a wood-effect vinyl trim. A single transparent vent/escape hatch is mounted in the roof and passenger entertainment is provided by radio/CD/DVD player linked to a 15-inch drop-down screen also mounted on the ceiling. The unit is detachable and can be removed from the vehicle when it is unattended, for added security.

On the road...

Although the 40 C12 is the smallest of the Iveco Daily platforms on offer from Excel Conversions it proved quite lively on the road and amazingly quiet at cruising speed. The driving position is very comfortable and offers a good view all round. The clutch action is light and the five-speed gearbox both slick and positive in operation. Brakes feel well balanced and offer positive feedback. Steering is light and positive, although there was a tendency to wander along stretches of motorway where the surface was indented with track grooves left by the constant stream of heavy trucks.

Large mirrors offer a very good view of the sides and the road behind.

The Daily proved to be a pleasant vehicle to drive and also very acceptable for passengers in the saloon. The two-plus-one seating layout leaves a wide gangway and there is plenty of leg room. TJ's choice not to install reclining seats had little impact on comfort as the Politecnica seats were very supportive.

Excel's attention to detail ensured the trim and fittings were installed to a high standard - leaving a clean and tidy finish. The deep panoramic windows also provide passengers with a good view.

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TransLinc opens its doors

Its own need for in-house training has driven TransLinc to offer its services to other operators. Martin Cole investigates

Among the many functions of Lincoln-based TransLinc is a comprehensive training department that deals with PCV driver training, disability awareness and the correct operation of community transport for minibus drivers and passenger assistants.

Courses have typically been designed to cater for in-house training, but TransLinc is also able to extend its services to outside organisations. Depending on the timing or the numbers involved, trainer Ray Harrison is happy to enrol candidates, enabling them to sit in on in-house training sessions, or will organise specific packages for groups of four or more.

TransLinc embarked down the in-house training route six years ago and has been conscious that the pressures on operators continue to grow as there is an onus on them to provide risk assessments of their duties to satisfy increasingly stringent Health & Safety requirements.

Ray said: "Unfortunately, these days experience is just not enough. Officialdom wants to see evidence of courses attended and just because staff may have been doing the job, quite satisfactorily for 15 years counts for very little.

"We've reached a stage where, on Dial-a-Ride operations, if a new customer rings up and wants transport, we have to check out what sort of wheelchair they have before we can agree to pick them up. Many of the modern motorised wheelchairs are incapable of being secured safely, and unless we undertake this action we could be liable for any injuries sustained by that passenger if an accident occurs.

"Fortunately, we've been building up a database, so as long as we can ascertain the make and model of the wheelchair we can often give an immediate decision over the phone.

"I think it's a bit much that suppliers of mobility equipment don't make it clear to customers that certain models are not capable of being transported. It's no fun for them if they've spent between £2,000 and £3,000 on a motorised chair that can't be carried because there is no way of clamping it.

"There is one type of chair that comes in two different styles. One you can secure and the seat is regarded as safe enough to allow the passenger to remain in it. The other version has a different seat which is not suitable. Because of the uncertainty, we now train all our staff to ensure no-one actually remains on these vehicles while they are in transit."

Mr Harrison prefers courses to have between four and six candidates because it is less intense for them and usually the number generates sufficient interaction to make the courses interesting and fun. Training includes a balance of theory, demonstration and hands-on practical work. This includes correct methods of clamping wheelchairs and securing passengers, removing or installing seats from tracking, safe use of the passenger lift or boarding ramps and how to operate them manually in the event of a power failure. Courses also include good practice guidelines on procedures and legal obligations on drivers for performing the pre-operational checks on the vehicle.

> **"It's a bit much that suppliers of mobility equipment don't make it clear to customers that certain models are not capable of being transported"**

PCV driver training is carried out by Alan Simpson, but this year it has proved very quiet. Alan said: "I think the situation reflects the general trend in the industry. It is getting increasingly difficult to attract drivers. The pay often doesn't reflect the responsibility of the job and the position doesn't command the respect it once did. Traffic congestion and complicated driving hours regulations also add a lot of pressure.

"It's been fairly busy in-house as we've a large fleet of our own and much of it deals with part-time operation and so a lot of part-time drivers are necessary. It's relatively easy work for retired people looking to supplement their pensions, but not very attractive to anyone with a mortgage and a family to support.

"It's also been difficult getting coach drivers with any sort of aptitude for the job and it is becoming harder to get them through the test because they have developed bad habits which take some getting rid of. I'm also very surprised at how poor their knowledge of the Highway Code is.

"New regulations make things difficult. Apart from not being able to use the term 'fail' - we can only say they haven't met the required standard, otherwise it infringes their Human Rights - the examiner is not allowed to talk to me about the cause of the problem. It gives me nothing specific on which to concentrate any retraining before the driver can sit the test again.

"Last year we were quite busy because we did a lot of training for SERCO - instructing drivers for transporting armed forces personnel."

Alan's usual course of action with a new applicant starts with an assessment where the prospective driver takes the vehicle on an indirect route from Lincoln to Gainsborough and back again. He evaluates the driver's performance and recommends a period of one-to-one training, usually five days unless they are completely inexperienced, culminating in a test on the final day.

■ For details of all TransLinc's PCV or special needs transport training services telephone 01522 503472.

Left: Ray Harrison ensures new staff are fully conversant with safe lift operation. Top: Simulated evacuation from a smoke-filled minibus. Above: Driver training is to full PCV standards